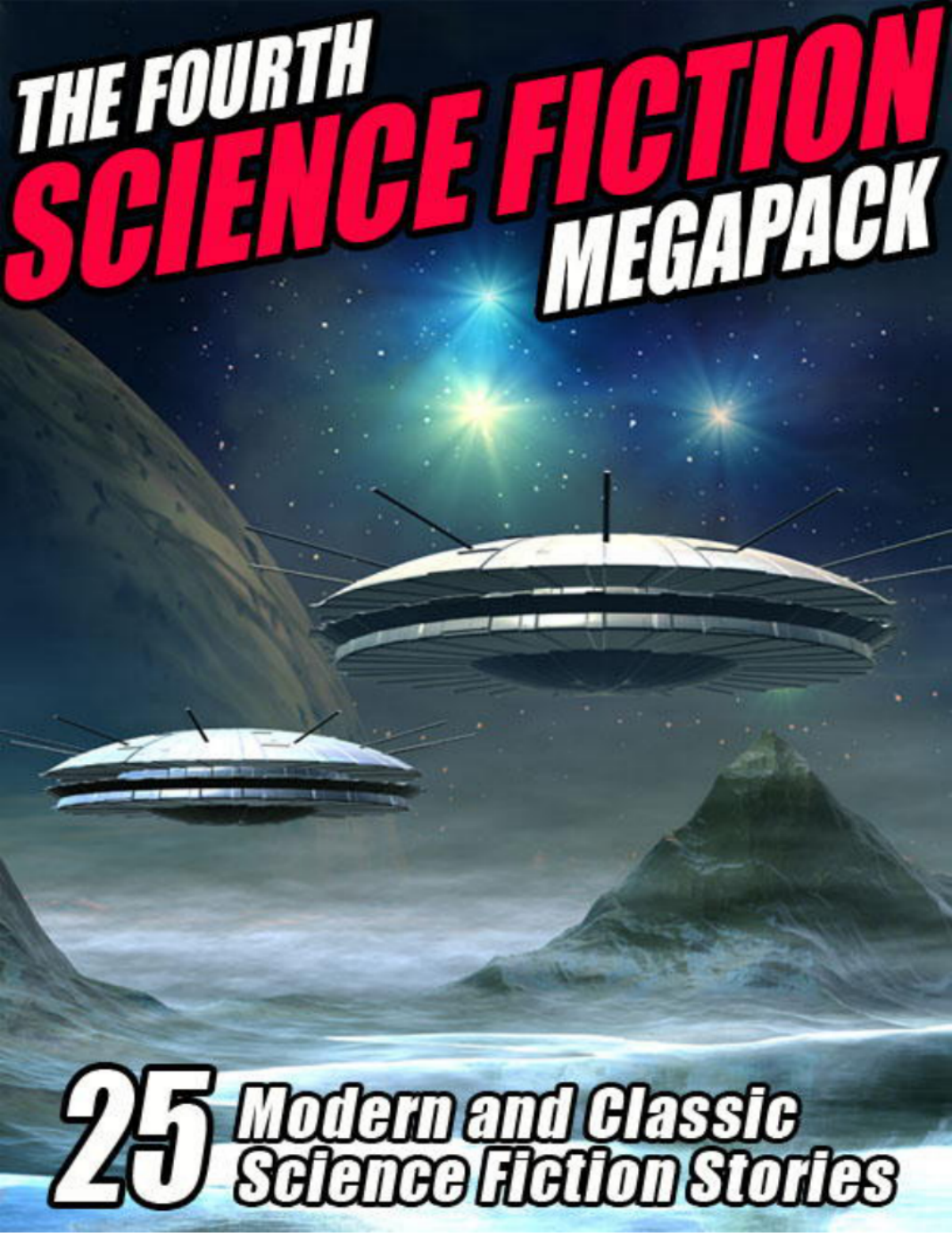
THE FOURTH
SCIENCE FICTION
MEGAPACK
25 Modern and Classic
Science Fiction Stories

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Annotation

The Fourth Science Fiction Megapack selects 25 more modern and classic science fiction stories, by talented authors new and old. Included in this volume: Mary A. Turzillo, E.C. Tubb, Murray Leinster, Theodore Sturgeon, Philip K. Dick, Katherine MacLean, Kurt Vonnegut Jr., Jason Andrew, Larry Hodges, Carmelo Rafala, Ray Cluley, Henry Kuttner, Cynthia Ward, George H. Scithers, John Gregory Betancourt, James C. Stewart, Milton Lesser, John Russell Fearn, Marissa Lingen, Donald A. Wollheim, James K. Moran, Harry Harrison, Edgar Pangborn, Isaac Asimov, and Ayn Rand.

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THE FOURTH SCIENCE FICTION MEGAPACK

25 MODERN AND CLASSIC SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

ZORA AND THE LAND ETHIC NOMADS, by Mary A. Turzillo

Zora let them in, of course. How many friends do you have when you live in the Martian arctic? And they were friends, after all, despite their smell (days, weeks, in an environment suit did not improve the cheesy odor their bootliners emitted).

They seemed more like friends because they were young, just kids, like her. In fact they seemed even younger than Zora. None of them had given birth. She remembered the innocent kid she'd been before Marcus, before the contract with the Corps, before Mars. And before the hard hard work of making a place to live in the cold and tenuous atmosphere of a place where she was a pilgrim and a pioneer.

Even if they had been strangers, you don't turn away travelers through the faded orange desert of Mars. To do so is tantamount to murder.

Yes, it taxed her family's own systems, because of course she and Marcus had to offer to let them use the deduster and recycle their sanitary packs. Her family's sparse larder was at their command She had to offer them warm baths and hot drinks, even before their little Sekou had taken his bath. They needed the bath much worse than Sekou did.

Smelly and needy as they were, they were society, animals of her species in a dangerous world of wide, empty skies and lonely silences.

It is said that Martians can take any substance and ferment it into beer, cheese, or a bioweapon. When she and Marcus first came to Mars, she naively believed they would bring their ethnic foods and customs with them. More than that, that they would revive ancient Kiafrikan traditions. They would drink palm wine from a calabash, they would learn to gengineer yams to grow in the artificial substrate that passed for soil on Mars, that they would tell old stories by the dim light of two moons instead of one bright one.

* * * *

Somehow learning Swahili takes a back burner to scraping together a life out of sand and rock and sky.

What she had not counted on was that all the Kiafrican culture that would ever come to Mars was embedded in hers and Marcus's two fine-tuned brains, and that even researching their mother culture wasn't going to be easy over thirty five to a hundred million miles

from home, three to thirty light minutes away from the electronic resources of Earth. And when you're that far from home (or when your home is that far from Earth), your culture consists of the entity that you owe your life to, that controls even the air you breathe, and the few humans you meet, your neighbors several tens of kilometers away, who are kind enough to tell you how to pickle squash blossoms stuffed with onion mush, how to sex cuy, and what to do if the bacteria in your recycler go sour.

Not that there aren't traditions. One of them is the toy exchange, and thank Mars for that. Zora managed to exchange a perfectly useless sandyfoam playhouse for a funny little "authentic" camera. Somebody had bought a carton of them, along with the silver emulsion film and chemicals they ate, and Sekou, less than three mears old, had been entranced with the flat images he could make of her, Marcus, and everything else inside the hab.

If he had been old enough to wear an environment suit, he probably would have done portraits of the rover.

Marcus couldn't understand why anybody with enough brains to stay alive on Mars would make such a thing, but it turned out it was a way of getting rid of an unmarketably small amount of silver mined from what the manufacturer had hoped to make a fortune on.

Sekou was beside himself with excitement when the Land Ethic Nomads had turned up. Not only were they new subjects for his photography hobby, they listened to his endless questions about the world outside the hab.

Listened, not answered.

The Land Ethic Nomads had different ideas about Mars than Zora and Marcus, and sometimes Zora worried that little Sekou would absorb them and want to run away with them when he was older. Zora and Marcus Smythe believed that humanity had an imperative to go forth and know the universe. One time Zora had heard a Catholic child reciting something called a catechism: Why did God make me? To know, love and serve him.

But how do you know God? By knowing the universe. And you can only know it by exploring it.

That was why the Smythes were on Mars.

The Land Ethnic Nomads had a different idea. They believed the land, meaning the surface of planets, moons, and asteroids, was sacred. Humans could try to know, to explore, But they must not destroy. If life existed on Mars, if it had ever existed, or had the potential of existing, humankind must not impose its own order over the land.

Land was sacred. All land. Even the surfaces of stars, even the spaces between stars were sacred.

Humans, they said, did not belong on Mars.

If asked why they lived on Mars, most Land Ethic Nomads would shrug and say it was their mission to convince people to go home, back to Earth.

Tango and Desuetuda pretty much left Sekou alone. Hamret liked to play with him, and admired the camera and the toy rover. But this new nomad, Valkiri, sat for long hours reading to the boy, telling him tales.

“The earth is so b beautiful. And she was so sad when her children deserted her to go to the cold, dim sky of Mars. Can you draw a picture of the sad sad Earth? Let me help you. Here’s her eyes, all full of tears.”

Valkiri’s voice faltered. She was aware of Zora standing over her. She turned the slate over and began to draw flowers (flowers!) on the reverse.

* * * *

“Marcus,” Zora whispered when everybody had retired that night, Sekou asleep on a bed of blankets at the foot of their bed, ostensibly because the nomads needed his room, but more because Zora didn’t trust their guests entirely “Marcus, they were preaching at our son.”

“Let them preach,” Marcus said shortly. “Children know what they see, not what triflers story to them.”

She curled against him, wanting the solace of his taut, warm body. She loved him better than life, angry as he sometimes made her with his silent deep thoughts. She didn’t want to outlive him. She wanted to lose herself in his body, but but she knew Sekou was old enough to notice if his parents made love. She listened a long time to the soft singing in the rooms below. Valkiri making a silky music on a polished drum, Tango’s rough bass, gruff in his Mars-dry throat, Desuetuda’s voice too soft to hear much of the time, soaring in emotion. Sweet the contrast between Tango’s damaged harshness and the sweetness of the two women and the drum. Propaganda songs.

Zora turned to him and put her hand on his chest. “Marcus, why do we have to keep them here? Couldn’t we give them some consumables and tell them to leave?”

“In the morning, Zora. Tomorrow early, I’ll invent some reason to make them leave. Tell them Sekou has an Earth virus, that should shift them out of here.”

She traced the ritual scars on his cheek. “That’s a good plan, baby. Play them for the fools they are.” Though she liked Tango and Desuetuda. It was the new one, Valkiri, she didn’t much care for.

“Is it just playing? Listen to the boy breathe. May have a virus, right enough.”

Zora fell silent. Pleading illness, her mother always said, was inviting the devil to supper. And, having lost Earth, and her family, and so much else, she sometimes wondered if Mars were enough recompense.

Sekou seemed so fragile. Nobody wants to outlive her own child.

She slept poorly and woke early.

* * * *

But the solar flare subsided in the night, and while the radiation count went down, the nomads bustled around packing. Zora had a chance to talk to Desuetuda, when the two were exchanging hydroponic stimulants recipes they didn’t want to trust to electronic mail. But Desuetuda, almost an old friend, wasn’t the problem. It was Valkiri.

Marcus helped them drag their equipment back to their rover, and when he took his helmet off after returning, Zora could see he was scowling.

“Not much cooperation there,” he said. “I don’t think that new girl, that Valkiri, will last long with the tribe.”

“Where’d she come from?”

“Lunar nomads. Last of her tribe there. Rest gave up, sold themselves to a cheap labor outsourcer on Earth—you can’t live off the land on Luna.” He made a small disapproving sound in his throat. “I wish I could talk to this group’s tribe chief. The rest of the tribe’s rovers went ahead a day. Tango says they hunkered down and rode the storm out with free radical repair drugs.”

“A good way to die young.”

“But painless. Stupid. And the drugs also reduce their use of consumables by about fifteen percent. Anyway, Valkiri jumped all over me. Implied we were child endangering just to have little ones here, on the Pharm. Hoped Sekou would beg us to go back to Earth.”

* * * *

When visitors leave, there is always cleaning up to do. Environmental parameters on oxygen and water consumption must be recalibrated to the normal settings. The hab must be tidied. Reports of the visit must be logged in and the balance sheets of consumables must be recalculated so that things will last until enough energy is

generated by the solar panels and the nuke.

So Zora didn't notice the anomaly until after fifteen hours.

* * * *

She had just put on the top segment of her environment suit, ready to recheck the entry airlock, which she always did when there had been visitors, because once Chocko, a nomad from a different tribe, had left so much grit in the airlock that it froze open. When she looked at the detector in the airlock, she almost dropped her helmet.

The radiation warning was going off like gangbusters.

She looked around wildly for Sekou, who was playing quietly in the high pressure greenhouse. Well, not playing so much as trying out an adult role—he was clumsily transplanting a frostflower.

The sensor for this airlock showed a lot of radiation, an alarming level. Cautiously, terrified, she grabbed a handheld sensor and ran to the airlock of the greenhouse where Sekou was humming to himself and getting his hands dirty

. Thank Mars the shrilling of the alarm didn't crescendo when she moved toward him.

But it didn't get any softer, either. That meant there was a tremendous beacon of deadly radiation coming from some distance, else moving would make it rise or diminish.

Where, where, where?

Think. If she grabbed Sekou, as was her instinct, she'd have to know where to move him, and quickly. Most likely the cooling system of their nuke, the hab's power source, had sprung a leak. She'd heard of such things.

But knowing that didn't help. She closed her eyes to concentrate and, unbidden, an image came to her of a slow trickling of radioactive water seeping into the clean water supply that heated the house.

"Marcus," she called in a shaky, low voice. Then she gave in to instinct, cycled through the airlock between her and Sekou and scooped him up into her arms.

They had no environment suit for him. He was still growing too fast. But if she couldn't find the source of the leak, she'd have to get him out of the hab, out into the environment.

Marcus appeared beside her, a sudden angel of rescue. Deliberate and measured movements. Competent. She exhaled a breath of gratitude. as he encircled her and Sekou in his arms.

"It's coming from all over," he said, as if he had read her mind. "Hard to know what could cause such a failure."

"There has to be a safe place in the hab," she said reasonably.

“Look,” he said, and broadcast his picture of the hab’s health and life systems monitor to her wrist com.

“Sekou—”

Sekou had at first been curious at his mother’s urgency, but now he looked scared. He knew what radiation was; children had to know the dangers of their environment, and knowing the signs of radiation, though it was a rare hazard, was just as much a part of their early training as learning to heed airlock failure alarms.

“It will be fine,” said Marcus, putting his hand on the boy’s head. And to Zora: “I’m looking now at all the sensors in the hab. If there’s a safe place, I can’t find it. I left an evacuation ball in the main entry. Let’s go.”

* * * *

Sekou didn’t like the evacuation ball. “Mama, please, it hurts.”

“How can the evacuation ball hurt?” She tried not to grit her teeth as she wadded the limp, slick surface around him and tried to force his legs to bend so she could seal it.

“It hurts my stomach when I have to put my knees up like that.”

“It will just have to hurt, then!” She tried to pry his left shoe off, then decided he might need shoes—wherever they ended up.

Marcus intervened. “Take a big breath, my man. Big breath. Hold it. Let it out slow. Now, pull your legs into the ball. See?”

Sekou, half enveloped by the flaccid translucent thing so like an egg, nodded through tears. His puckered little face, trying so hard to be brave, stabbed Zora’s heart. It occurred to her for the hundredth time that Marcus was just better with children than she was. Marcus winked at Sekou as he pressed the airtight closure shut.

The transparent ball, designed for animal use, had two handles so Zora and Marcus carried it between them. If only one person were there to carry, it would have been rolled, not a pleasant process for the person inside.

“Go ahead,” Marcus murmured. “I’ll do the minimum shutdown.”

“Marcus, I can do it. Sekou wants you.”

“Sekou wants both of us. Go, girl. I can do it faster and we’ll all be safer.”

* * * *

The rover was ready to go, its own nuke always putting out power. She bundled Sekou inside it and fumbled to embrace him

through the pliable walls of the ball, finally settling on a clumsy pat on the top of his head.

"Where to go?" Marcus asked.

"I don't know, I don't know. The Centime's pharm is within range, but are they at their winter place?" Zora was shaking from the shock of being jerked out of her comfortable hab and, worst of all, seeing her little boy in fear and pain and danger. She fingertipped their code and got back cold silence, then the Gone Fishing message.

"Strike out for Borealopolis."

"We need somebody to sponsor us there. Even if we have enough credit to buy consumables, we need somebody to vouch for us."

"Call Hesperson." Hesperson sold them small electronics and solar cell tech.

They did so, and explained the radioactivity problem. The image on the screen was wary. Hesperson sighed. "I wish I could tell you what to do. There's a big decontamination mission near Equatorial City—"

"Our rover would take twenty days to get there! And we would run out of consumables first."

"Let me get back to you on this." And Hesperson was gone.

"The Centimes," Zora said. This couldn't be happening. Couldn't. It was a crazy nightmare, and soon she'd wake up. "We'll contact the Centimes at their summer habitat and ask them to let us use their Pharm. They can send us codes to unlock it."

Krona Centime's face, on the monitor, looked distracted and her hair was sticking up as if she hadn't combed it in several days. Maybe something had happened during the Centime's trip to the southern hemisphere to derange her mind. "Yes! Yes, of course. No, wait, I ought to ask Escudo." Without waiting for an answer, she logged off.

Marcus was staring at a life-support monitor. Some of the rover's functions ran much better when the sun was in the sky, and it wasn't up very much in Winter-March. Zora pressed his hand, a gesture he could barely appreciate through the thickness of their gloves.

Sekou's voice cut through the silence like a tiny flute. "Those people have a little girl. Could I play with her?"

Zora had forgotten that Sekou had a com with him when she'd scooped him up to evacuate the hab. Now she was glad—it might come in very handy. Especially if they were to become homeless, landless people in a Martian city where they would be forced to scrape or beg for the very oxygen they breathed.

"She won't be there," said Marcus, and patted his head through the thick membrane. "But I'll ask if you can play with some of her toys." The Centimes were known as spendthrifts and were rumored a vast store of luxury items and gadgets. Zora hoped they were also

generous.

Escudo Centime's dark, strong-jawed face appeared in Zora's monitor. "Help yourself. I sent a command to the entry airlock to let you in. It should recognize your biometrics."

And so, in the cramped rover, confined to their environment suits with Sekou in his rescue bubble, they set off.

* * * *

Centime Pharm was almost invisible, most of it underground, its sharp angles softened by sand settled out of the tenuous atmosphere.

"That's it, thank heaven," said Zora.

Marcus said nothing, just drove the rover toward the hab entrance. Zora could read nothing of his expression through his helmet.

Sekou's voice broke the silence. "When can we go home? I want my Croodelly."

The Croodelly was a piece of worn-out shirt Zora had fashioned into a stuffed animal of indeterminate species. She wished once more that they had had time to pack.

More time? They had none at all. She was totting up in her head the costs of decontaminated the hab and discarding everything damaged within. Their experiments would have to go; the radiation would start mutations and blight even the most vigorous plants and bacteria.

Marcus, reading her mind, said, "Rehabilitation may be possible."

"If it isn't done properly, we'd be in danger. In the end, we'd shorten our lives and our science would be suspect."

"Or it may be impossible. We can't know now. Here's the airlock. Get ready."

Zora waited for Marcus to approach Centime Pharm's outer airlock. It was silly to be afraid of an empty hab, but she thought, irrationally, of creatures, runaways, ghosts, inside.

Marcus opened the rover hatch and slid out. He plodded a few paces from the rover, then turned and looked back, his suit dusty under the low autumn sun. He couldn't have seen her face through her faceplate, but he stood stock still and looked at the two of them, his wife and his son, standing out in the Martian dessert. His voice came through the com. "What are you afraid of, Zora?"

"You feel it, too, don't you? I keep thinking there are things on Mars—no, people on Mars—who don't like us. It's so cold out there, and that hab—it seems haunted."

Marcus turned back to the hab and plodded on.

Zora said, “I know it’s irrational, but the darkness—we’re so far from New Jersey, aren’t we?”

Marcus spoke softly, still marching toward the dark hab entrance. “This was a decision we made. Can’t unmake it. But for your sake, if I could, I’d change.”

“No, love. We’re here. We wanted this, both of us. However it turns out, we’ll play it as it lays.”

But Sekou, she thought. Sekou is the innocent passenger.

“Mama,” he said. His voice sounded near, even though a thick plastic membrane separated him from her.

“Hush,” she said. “Papa’s trying to get us a place to stay.” Sekou couldn’t see the readouts. They had enough consumables in the rover to get back to their own hab, but what good did that do? If they went back, they’d fry.

Because she was watching the rover readouts, she didn’t notice at first that Marcus had turned and sprinted back toward the rover. Then she heard the shrill alarm relayed through his com.

He pushed through the rover door and sat down facing forward, not looking at her. “Radiation there, too.”

She stared at his helmeted face, in shock. Then she laughed, shakily. “What is this, an epidemic?”

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” he asked.

“Yeah. Our visitors.”

“Might could be Hesperson has something for us,” he said. He accessed the contact, and Hesperson’s assistant answered the call.

“How could this have happened?” asked the assistant “You think your nomad visitors had something to do with it?”

Zora shook her head. “It could be. There was a new woman with them, Valkiri. No last name, of course. She seemed more—fanatical than the rest.”

“New? You know some of these people from before?”

“We trade with them,” said Marcus. “Chocko, the one we know the best, he wasn’t there, but the other three, except for this Valkiri, were—” he hesitated.

“Friends,” Zora said.

Hesperson’s assistant looked glum. “So you could be carrying some nanosaboteur or even a big chunk of something radioactive—”

“No, no, the rover has no signs, except of course for the power plant—”

“There could be a problem with your suit sensors. The radioactive contaminants could be traveling with you.”

“The rover sensors—”

“The software in your suit sensors could have damaged that.” The assistant smiled a phony, nervous smile into the screen. “Why not just

go back to your hab and wait. I'm sure if you contact your corp they'll have some advice for you."

Zora and Marcus stared at each other. The Corp that owned their contracts was the last entity in the world they wanted to contact right now. The Vivocrypt Corp had paid for four intensive years of education on Earth for each of them, equivalent to doctoral degrees, then financed their journey to Mars and bankrolled the their hab and Pharm.

This was not charity on the part of the Vivocrypt Corp. The microbiology courses they had taken were very specifically oriented to engineering certain useful substances and organisms that could survive only in extreme conditions. The Vivocrypt Corp had very specific uses for these discoveries.

And Zora and Marcus, who had married and started a family with the prospect of living off the Corp, had allowed their science to take some twists and turns that didn't lead directly to what the Corp wanted. Because the training they had received on Earth had aroused in each of them a fierce, shared delight in science for science's sake.

The Vivocrypt Corp would not be pleased that the expensive hab and Pharm was no longer of any use as a research and development extension of the Corp.

Zora looked down at Sekou, who was rocking back and forth in the rescue bubble hard enough to bang it against the bulkhead of the rover. His face seemed to be just two big eyes. "We can't go back," she whispered.

"Call the Corp."

The computer avatar that was their usual communication link with the Corp appeared: a young woman dressed in a black suit. She was pretty and imperious. "Your hab is destroyed? Do you have the funds to cover this?" This computer avatar was apparently programmed for heavy irony. The Smythes were so deeply in debt that only a major technological breakthrough would get them in out of the cold again.

Marcus sent a private message to Zora. "Think they know there's a problem? Their satellite imagers might have seen us carrying the bubble."

Zora exhaled sharply. "If the corp saw something like that, they'd think we were running, maybe planning to sell out to another corp. We'd be talking to a live human corpgeek, not this avatar."

Marcus unmuted the com and spoke to the corporation avatar. "We're in trouble, honcha. We need shelter and atmosphere."

The avatar smiled brightly. "We suggest you go back to the hab and see what can be salvaged. Of course the Vivocrypt Corp values you highly, but your laboratories contain priceless equipment shipped

from Earth orbit."

"We'll be fried!" Zora hadn't expected quite this level of cold-heartedness.

"Corp estimates your life expectancy will be shorted only by about fifteen years, on the average. That's just a statistical average. One or both of you might sustain no more damage burden than you suffered in the trip to Mars."

"What about our son? What about our future children?" Marcus was shouting.

The avatar's smile broadened idiotically. These things were so badly programmed, Zora wanted to scramble the software that ran her. But the avatar was mouthing Corp policy. "No guarantees are made as to reproductive success in Corp hires, as you will find in your contracts. My memory provides me with a vid showing that you were advised of this policy when you originally sold your contracts to Vivocrypt Corp."

Marcus voice was low and dangerous. "Let us speak to a human corpgeek."

"Of course," said the avatar, nodding gravely, like a cartoon character. The image froze for fifteen seconds, then she came alive with renewed joviality. "I have consulted with Bioorganism Resource Assistant Director Debs. She confirms the advice I've given you."

"We want to talk to this Debs geek."

"One moment, please." The avatar froze again. Then, "I'm so sorry, Assistant Director Debs is finishing her daily solitaire game and will return your call tomorrow or the next sol. Thanks for calling the Vivocrypt Corporation. May Father Mars and the bright new sol bring you fresh inspiration to serve the Corp." The image vanished.

Zora fingertipped furiously to link again to the corp, but access was rejected.

"I hate that religious stuff about Father Mars," she said to Marcus. "Avatars don't believe in the supernatural, or in having a 'bright new sol.'"

"Corp doesn't either. Using spirituality as mind control. As if they need any more control over us."

"They hope we'll stop thinking, just go back and work until we die of cancer or radiation burns." She noticed that Sekou was listening to them on his com. "We gave them our time, our whole lives. They owe us at least shelter."

Marcus's tone turned flat and almost brutal. "Machine minds. Machine hate. Use us as if we were the machines. We run down, they dump us."

To her horror, she realized she was starting to cry. She turned her face so Sekou would not see it.

“Mama, I have to go.”

Startled, she turned her face back to him. “Go where?”

“You know. Go potty.”

“Darling, just wait.”

Marcus seemed to be deliberately holding his helmet so she couldn’t see his expression, but her guess was that it was grim. He said, “I’m calling Hesperson again.”

The assistant answered again this time. “Mister Hesperson said he was working on your problem, trying to come up with some ideas. Meantime, he said to proceed as we discussed before.”

“We have a child with us, Mister—” Zora couldn’t remember the assistant’s name. She stopped, took a deep breath and said, “We have credit, you know. And equity in the Pharm and hab, because it’s held on a lien in our names. Our Corp purchased twenty years of our labor for each of us, and that’s gone to pay for the physical plant. We can borrow against that—”

The assistant held up a hand. “If it were only that, Dr. Smythe. But Mister Hesperson has information from Krona Centime that somehow you’ve contaminated or infected their Pharm and labs.”

“How could they know—?”

Marcus spoke up. “The Centimes must have remotely read the reading on their outermost airlock. But it was hot before we got here.”

“Still, you seem to be carrying something—”

“What crap,” Zora broke in. “This is not an contagious agent. This is a problem with the coolant in our nuclear power plant. I don’t know what the Centimes told you, but we are not ‘carrying something.’”

Marcus said, “Get Hesperson. He will talk to us. He’s no trifling fool to hide behind his bots and hires.”

Hesperson came on. “It’s beginning to look like something happened back there, something to do with those Land Ethic Nomads you entertained overnight.”

“Didn’t want to think that,” said Marcus.

Zora bit her lip. “Not all of them. That Valkiri woman.”

“She may have done something to the nuke at the Centime’s Pharm, as well, Dr. Smythe. You understand the implications of this.”

Zora squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them and blinked to clear her mind. “Yes, ombudsman Hesperson. There’s a killer on the loose.”

He grimaced and nodded. “Exactly. And if seems you are not her only victims.”

Marcus said, “Then best shelter us until she’s apprehended.”

Hesperson continued smoothly. “And draw fire here? If this woman follows you into Borealopolis, several thousand lives will be at risk. The entire population of our city would be endangered.” He

leaned into the viewscreen. “Let me put a proposition to you, Drs. Smythe. Bring me this woman, give her up to us, and we will allow you shelter. Perhaps I can even persuade the Borealopolis citycorp to reward you somehow.”

Marcus said, “How? How can we stop her.”

Hesperson made a cage of his fingers and looked over it at them “I assume you have the usual homesteader’s aversion to visual monitoring of your hab?”

“We left Earth to avoid that kind of violation. “Zora snapped.

Hesperson’s mouth twitched. “Then let me remind you that you are the only ones who have seen her face.”

* * * *

Zora felt exhausted. The sols were short this time of year, and the sky had darkened several hours before. Sekou’s whimpers cut her like little blades, and she herself was getting hungry. “My brain is shutting down, Marcus. What can we do? Land Ethic Nomads are many of them unregistered. We don’t know Valkiri’s last name, or even if she was born in a place where she would be given one. Valkiri is probably an alias. We don’t even know the legal names of the tribe members we’ve sheltered and traded with before.”

“We’ve seen her face.”

“Yes, briefly and in bad light.” In respect for the Land Ethic Nomad’s desire to conserve resources, the lights in the hab had been dimmed. Of course, that served Valkiri’s purposes very well. “But we could download face reconstruction software and create a picture. Or —”

“Mama,” said Sekou quite reasonably, “I really have to go now. Can’s we go home now?”

“No, honey.”

“You promised we could go visit Mr. and Mrs. Centime and that little girl. Please, mama. They have a bathroom, don’t they?”

Zora turned to him. “You’ll just have to hold it! This is an emergency, Sekou.”

“Mama, I can’t!”

“Well, then you’ll have to go in your pants. We have more important problems.”

“Mama—”

She turned to Marcus. “We can’t pressurize the rover just to let him urinate. We just can’t.” The rover passenger compartment had no airlock. It took a long time to pressurize and they might have a much greater need later to pressurize, if for example they had to consume

water or food. Of course they'd have to find water and food, which they hadn't had time to pack.

Marcus squatted down in his cumbersome environment suit and looked at Sekou, bent in a cramped ball inside the bubble. "Listen, Sekou. Your daddy and mama understand. We ran into a problem and we're trying to solve it fast. Now, take a deep breath and tell me if there's enough air in there."

Sekou made a great show of inflating his chest as far as was possible while bent double, then blowing out. "I think it's okay, Daddy."

"Good. That's a good boy. Now close your eyes and keep trying the air in there. Breath big deep breaths, that's right."

"But if I—?"

"If you have an accident, we can clean it up soon as we get where we're going. Okay? Are you a big guy?"

"No, Daddy."

"Oh yes. Big, brave guy. Breathe again, let's see you puff out those cheeks."

Sekou breathed in and out again, eyes closed.

Zora felt again the pang of being not very good with kids. When a girl leaves her family at fifteen and the earth itself at nineteen, as Zora had, maybe she doesn't pick up the knack of being good with kids. "He'll pee himself if he falls asleep," she sent on a private channel to Marcus.

Marcus said, "Yeah, and what harm is there in that, considering the ice we're on?"

That crumbled Zora's sense of reality, and she began laughing, in a kind of relief at having let go some of the pettier fears of their situation. Then something occurred to her. "We could use the photograph that Sekou took."

Marcus turned his eyes to her. "Use—"

"To find her. If we have an image, we don't need to try to recognize her face. We can upload it to Marsnet and let their biometrics identify her."

"Girl, I thought I married you for your pretty face, but I'll love you forever for your brain. Wait, though. What if she's not registered?"

"She won't be, probably. But Earth shares biometric data with Marsnet."

"Still won't tell us where she is on Mars. I like the idea—"

"Even Land Ethic Nomads can't stay out in the sky forever. Send out biometrics, including the photo itself, and tell Pharmholders to check when travelers seek shelter."

"Yes, yes, Daddy, Mama, we can go home then?" Sekou was not

asleep, it seemed.

"Yes, little habling, yes, but close your eyes and go to sleep like Daddy said."

"Okay. But I have to go so bad!"

Marcus patted the top of the bubble with his gloved hand. "Remember what I said, now. Close your eyes. Mama and Daddy have to talk some."

Zora said, "There's one problem. I have no idea where that photo plate is."

"Ask Sekou."

Sekou heard his name and was instantly awake, sensing some how that he could be part of the solution to the family crisis. "Mommy! Mommy! It's in my bedroom. I tried to show you when you read my story to me, only you made me go to sleep."

Zora felt a shudder of fear and hope. She knew Marcus would volunteer to go back into the hab and retrieve the camera and the photo plate. She knew it was dangerous, but she made an instant calculation: life without Marcus would be hell, and life on Mars without Marcus would be worse than hell.

Marcus had already turned the rover around. She bit her lip. She was going to insist on being the one to go into that hot hab. But she wouldn't make her bid until the last possible minute. She'd surprise him, force him into letting her do it before he could think. The entire ride was silent. Maybe Marcus was making the same calculations.

* * * *

As they neared the hab, Sekou's tired little voice piped up. "Can we go back in now?"

"No! Stop asking! Mommy and Daddy are just trying to protect you," Zora snapped.

Marcus said, "Sekou, my big smart man, you remember about the radiation sensors? You know what bad rays do?"

"Yeah, Dad. I just hoped maybe they went away."

"Not yet, son. We may have to move to a new hab."

"Can I take my toys there?"

"You'll get new ones."

"But you'll get my camera?"

"Yes, but I'll tell you straight up, we have to keep it."

Zora had been wondering why Sekou no longer clamored for a bathroom, but a glance at his overalls revealed a dark stain on the front. Sekou, noticing her glance, said. "It kind of smells bad, and it's all cold and wet."

Zora murmured, “Sorry, baby.” And then, trying to think what Marcus would say, “It’s okay. Don’t worry about it.”

Marcus stopped the rover about thirty meters from the hab entrance. He untoggled the rover door and began to open it.

“Marcus,” she said.

“Don’t, Zora. You can’t do this.”

She had thought very carefully about it. “You’re stronger, I know. But that’s exactly why I should go in and find the camera. If something happened to me while I was in there, you would be better able to care for and defend Sekou than I would be.”

“Zora, suppose you’re pregnant.”

“I’m not. I’m having a period. It just started.” This was not strictly true, but Zora felt like her period was about to start, and anyway, she used a colored-light cycle regulator had never failed her, both in conceiving Sekou and in preventing subsequent conceptions.

“Zora,” he said tiredly, “you playing me?”

She felt a flush of outrage. “You want me to take off my environment suit and show you the blood on my underpants?” Even though actually, come to think of it, she was playing him.

What could she do? If Marcus died, if he got sick and died, her life on Mars without a mate was too horrible to envision—she’d be meteor sploosh, she’d be forced to sell herself, she’d be dead. Mother and child, she and Sekou, would be like naked bacteria in the harsh UV sky of Mars. But it was even worse than that. Without Marcus, she wouldn’t want to go on living. Not even for Sekou. It would be better to venture everything, live or die now, than die slowly as the widow of Dr. Marcus Smythe.

“Let me do it, Marcus.” She heard the pleading in her voice, and the sharp knife of desperation under her groveling.

“Zora—”

“Oh, never mind! You always want to charge ahead, the big bull rover, like some stupid big male animal from Earth.”

Even through the helmet she could see him wince.

She realized just then that they hadn’t turned their coms to private channel, and that Sekou was listening intently.

Marcus said, “How you doing, big guy?”

“Okay,” said Sekou very softly. Then, louder, “It’s wet and icky and smelly in here. How long before we go home?”

Zora closed her eyes and thanked whatever gods controlled their fate that Sekou was in a bubble, because she was very close to hitting him. “We aren’t going—”

Marcus swiftly and seamlessly interrupted her. “Sekou, here’s a trick for getting over the bad parts. Make up good thoughts. Like, if you wanted to invent a toy, what would it be?”

“A camera to take smells and tastes,” said Sekou promptly.

“Those pictures you took, those were good,” Marcus continued. “Maybe help us get a new home. Your Daddy’s going to get the camera.”

“Can I take more pictures then?”

Zora focussed on the back of Marcus’s suit. “When did you tear your suit?” she asked.

Marcus wheeled around and looked at her. “Playing me, girl? My indicators say the suit’s fine.”

“It’s not torn through,” she said reasonably. “But it has a weak spot. That’s bad, baby.”

“Slap some tape on it.”

She rummaged the storage compartment and got out the tape. “I can’t handle this in my gloves,” she said.

He was quiet. “Have to pressurize the rover cabin then, to mend it. That what you want? Mend it.”

She tried not to smile. The nearly invisible spot she had seen on his suit was not likely to cause problems. “You can’t go out into the hab in a weakened suit.”

Marcus stared at her. “What kind of jive is that, Zora?”

“No, Marcus, no! Sekou, tell Daddy he’s got a little tear in his suit.”

Sekou tried to crane his neck, but of course he couldn’t see anything.

“Girl, I know you’re playing me. I know this.”

She threw the tape at his feet. “Be a fool, then. Get us all killed.”

“You’re counting that I can’t take the chance.” He stooped slowly and picked up the tape.

Zora continued, as if she had just thought of it. “You can pressurize the cabin and fix your suit. But it’ll take awhile to pressurize. A half hour at least. I’ll go get the camera with the photo while you the atmosphere builds up.”

“When you come back, we’ll lose all that good atmosphere again.”

She looked at him blandly. “It can’t be helped. You can take the opportunity to get Sekou out and cleaned up. We have no clean clothes for him, but ten minutes over the heater will at least dry his britches.”

Marcus stared back unsmiling. “You’re a jive fool, girl. You get serious radiation sick, I’ll kill you.”

“You saying don’t go?”

He stared longer. Then, “Go.”

* * * *

Zora didn't look back at the rover as she loped awkwardly in her environment suit to the front airlock of the hab. Once inside, she felt a sense of unreality, her family home having turned alien. Odd to fumble to open the door to Sekou's tiny room, not to feel the softness of his blanket through her thick glove. Everything was changed, charmed, deadly.

Her com still connected her to her child and her husband back in the rover. "Sekou," she asked, matter of fact. "Tell Mama where the camera is."

Sleepy, Sekou's voice came back, "Under the bed."

Environment suits aren't built for crawling on hands and knees. Under the bed Sekou had stowed all sorts of things, pitiful toys made of household scraps and discards. A whole fleet of rovers made of low quality Mars ceramics with wobbly wheels that only a child would consider round. A doll she had made of scraps of cloth, and upon which he had put a helmet made of a discarded jar.

And way back toward the wall, where her clumsy fat-fingered glove could scarcely reach, the camera.

"The picture is still in the camera, Sekou?"

"Yes, Mama."

She felt a flash of fury for not having paid more attention to her own child's plaything. "How do you get the pictures out?"

"You have to develop them."

"Say what?"

Marcus broke in. "It's a chemical process. The film emulsion is sensitive to light, you apply chemicals to fix it. You unload the film into the chemical bath in the dark."

Sekou had done this by himself? Mars god almighty, her boy was going to be something fine as a grown man. "Why can't we just give the camera to Hesperson? And why can't we do the developing in the rover?"

"It needs water, if I understand correctly. And I'm not sure Hesperson has the chemicals."

Sekou's voice broke in, excited. "They're already all mixed up. Look behind the sanitizer. And Mama, it has to be way dark or you'll spoil them. Take them in the bathroom."

Marcus added, "It's nineteenth century technology, Zora. Just do as the boy says."

"Nineteenth century," she said. "What game are you two running on me?" She felt the fool. She had a Ph.D. in biochemical engineering. How could she not how to work a nineteenth century gadget? But then she couldn't weave cloth, or knit, or make a fire with flint, either.

"Turn off your helmet light, too," Sekou added.

* * * *

Thirty minutes later, she was staring at film negatives. “Why is there no color? Insufficient band width? And how could anybody be recognizable?”

“I think any computer could deal with that. Try it on your com.”

She scanned the tiny transparent images into her com and was rewarded with a bright, colorized image of Valkiri. After the com had thought a minute, it added a third dimension to the colorized image, although both color and third dimension looked a little off from the memory she had of Valkiri.

Marcus’s voice in her com startled her. “Bail out of there, woman. You’ve absorbed enough REMs to light up Valles Marineris.”

* * * *

Marcus was back in his suit, Sekou in his bubble, and the pressure in the rover falling rapidly when she got it.

“My suit doesn’t show a radiation load,” she said.

“Something wrong with it. They probably sabotaged our suits, too. Let’s book for Borealopolis.”

Sekou didn’t even ask to see the picture. “Those guys that stayed in my room,” he said, “they did something bad, didn’t they?” Through the haze of the bubble’s surface, she could see betrayal written on his pinched face.

“I’m sorry, Sekou. I think it was just the new girl, the one with the frizzy blonde hair. But we can’t trust them any more.”

She had stopped trusting her conviction that she wasn’t pregnant, too. She’d have to find a machine and test herself the minute they were safely inside the city.

* * * *

Hesperson greeted them inside the city’s outer airlock. His assistant took the image “We’ll run a biometric search on this, right away.”

“And you’ll take us in,” Marcus asked. “We need consumables. Can’t live like Land Ethic Nomads, running from hab to hab, on charity.”

Hesperson smiled warily, “The city management of Boreaolopolis can offer you a nice cubicle, plus free air, water, food, and utilities for up to a year.

“Marcus,” Zora said, “We’ll have to contact Vivocrypt corp about renegotiating our contracts.”

Marcus looked grim. “They’ll want another ten mears of work, no lie.”

Hesperson took them to a cramped, body-smelling holding area where they could unsuit while he arranged for temporary quarters. Zora wanted some hot tea, but she had to find out something first. She slipped away and found a cheap medical test machine in a dark corridor. It looked battered and she wondered if the lancet that nicked her skin was even sterile. Bu in two minutes, it told her what she wanted to know—or didn’t want to know. She was pregnant.

She stood in the corridor in the dimness for endless minutes. How long had she been in the radioactive hab? Her suit com would have the information, but she didn’t want to know, really.

What difference would it make now?

She willed herself to walk back to the holding area.

* * * *

Should she tell Marcus she had lied? Or should she quietly go and abort the fetus? She had lied about the rip in his suit, he had forgiven her that lie. But could she compound the lie, saying she was sure she wasn’t pregnant, a further betrayal?

Her mind was a welter of horror and confused thinking.

“—and you can run routine quality tests on our water treatment until we find you work more suited to your backgrounds,” the assistant was saying. “Any questions?”

Sekou looked up at her and whispered “Can I ask how long before we can go back, Mama?”

And all the stars help her, she had all she could do not to slap him.

* * * *

Hesperson hustled back in, smiling. “Then there’s a break in the search for Valkiri. The image your little boy recorded with matches the face of a Land Ethic radical who had jumped contract from Equatorial City two years ago. Her name was Estelle Query. She was a nuclear engineer in charge of developing ways to maximize heat production in large urban nukes.”

“Figures,” said Marcus.

“What a smart little boy you have here,” said Hesperson.

“Somebody will pay big franks for his contract someday.”

Zora was already feeling horrible guilt over nearly losing her temper with Sekou. This just made her want to cry.

“Would you like a nice clean pair of pants?” the assistant asked Sekou. He nodded eagerly and cast an only slightly worried look at Zora and Marcus as she led him out to get cleaned up. Zora buried her face in her hands.

Marcus pulled her hands away and searched her face, perplexed. “Girl, we’re vindicated. They can’t say it was our fault any more. This Valkiri-Estelle bee has as much as admitted she did it.”

“But we can’t go home, Marcus. And Sekou deserves better than a cubicle two meters square with only minimal utilities.”

“Would be good if we could sue her, or her former corp. But there’s no hope there.” He pulled her to him and stroked her shoulders. “Girl, there’s something worse wrong than that. Call it my hoodoo sense, but you’re grieving a bigger grief than our happy ex-home.”

She sobbed for several minutes into his shirt, then pulled away and said, “I lied, Marcus. I am pregnant, and I’ve stupidly murdered our baby. It can’t live after the dose of radiation I took. It might spontaneously abort, but we can’t take the chance. A damaged infant on Mars—the corp will take it away and kill it.”

He grabbed her shoulders and looked hard in her face. Then he shook his head sadly and hugged her close. “Zora, girl, don’t blame yourself. I should have known. Truth be told, I did know there was no rip in my suit. I just thought you wanted to be the big woman. I thought I’d let you have your pride, be the heroine. But you were storying—I knew that.”

She tried to pull away, but he held her tight. She sobbed some more, then said, “You’re so damned intuitive. Did you know I was pregnant, too?”

His embrace loosened, and she saw his sadness. “Truth be told, I think I did. Something in your eyes. Your skin glowed like it did before, when you were big with Sekou. But I told myself, you’re tripping, Marcus man. Didn’t want to think it, straight up.” His voice sank to almost inaudible. “Didn’t want to think you’d lie to me about that.”

After awhile, she said, “And can you forgive me?”

He let go of her and leaned against the cold marscrete wall “Forgive you, forgive myself for not being the man and telling you right out not to play me.”

She could scarcely make her voice loud enough to hear. “Where do we go from here?”

He shrugged. “The medical for the abortion is cheap. Medbots are

clean and fast. And as far as surviving here, what we've got in our brains is enough to sell to some corp."

"Sekou," she said. "They'll put him in a group school her. But he needs to go back to the on-line school. More than that, he needs a real home."

"Sekou needs to hear the truth, which is that he's a smart kid, and strong, despite his minor ills, and he'll sell high to some corp that likes his brain as much as Vivocrypt liked yours and mine. Now I'm going to find that sorry assistant and ask what we have to do to get a meal around here." Marcus pushed the door further open. "Whoa. Look who's here, in all new clothes."

"Mama, you think I'm smart, too?"

It was Sekou, wearing a jumpuit that had probably been blue when it was new. At least it was clean. The assistant had apparently brought him back and left.

Marcus rubbed the top of Sekou's head, then continued down the corridor.

Zora bent over and hugged Sekou. She ran over in her mind what they had been saying. How long had the child been standing there listening? She turned from Marcus and hoisted him up into her arms—a heavy bundle though he was a skinny kid. "Mama thinks you're way too smart for your britches. Where did that jumpsuit come from?"

"I dunno." He opened his hand, revealing a bright twist of paper, "They gave me a candy. Can I eat it?"

"No! Bad for you!" She resisted the idea that candy might become part of the Smythe family diet now that they were going to live in Borealopolis. It would be hard to adjust to prepared foods from the refectory after having lived primarily for years on cuy and chicken and stuff from their own greenhouses.

He looked at the candy fondly, then put it in Zora's outstretched hand. "Mama, what does 'big' mean?"

"What? It means not small. What are you talking about?"

"I thought it meant like when some lady is going to have a baby."

Oh no. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I thought maybe you might have a baby in there." He patted her tummy shyly.

"No." Her stomach twisted. "No baby."

Sekou dug in the pocket of the jumpsuit and brought out a tiny action figure, a boy in an environment suit. "But Daddy said—"

"You shouldn't be listening when Daddy and Mama are talking privately." But would there be any privacy once they had settled in to Borealopolis? Even the best paid city hires lived in quarters not much bigger than the passenger compartment of their rover. Speaking of which, they would probably have to sell the rover. What use do city

people have for such a thing?

"Sorry." His voice was very soft.

She had some credit, and she noticed the holding area had a tea dispenser. "Would you like some mint tea? I think they can put sweetener in it."

She figured she had lied to Marcus, it would be a bad thing to lie to Sekou, young though he was.

When they had gotten their tea, which did indeed come with sweetener, she sat opposite Sekou on the little bench and then, in a rush of affection, moved over and grabbed him in a hug.

"Mama was going to have a baby, but something bad happened. You know about radiation, about the accident."

"Yes. I've been thinking. I wanted to ask you something."

She had been poised with a careful explanation, but Sekou's question threw her. "About what?"

"About my camera."

"The camera." She was momentarily at a loss, and then, before he opened his mouth, all in a rush, she guessed what he was about to say.

"Mama, the camera works because light turns the chemical into something different, so it looks black after you develop it."

She dropped her hands and stared at him.

"Mama, radiation comes in different kinds. Light is one kind. But the radiation from our nuke, that would turn the chemical all black too."

She began to giggle.

"Mama, the picture took. So there wasn't any radiation."

Zora's giggles shook her body until, if the fetus was developed enough to be aware, it would have gotten the giggles too. She fingertipped on her com and called Marcus.

* * * *

How had Valkiri done it? How had she ruined every sensor and monitor in the whole hab and pharm?

They never found Valkiri, of course. But when they went back to the Pharm—cautiously, of course, because who trusts the reasoning of a child?—they found Valkiri—they couldn't believe the other two had abetted her—had dusted the surfaces of every sensor, including the one in Marcus's environment suit, but not her own, with Thorium 230 powder It had been imported from earth for some early experiments in plant metabolism. It was diabolic.

It cost a lot of credit to have everything checked out. Several other habs that had been contaminated made vague threats about

suing the Smythes for not notifying them, as if they could have known any earlier what happened. But the fact that Sekou (Sekou!) had solved the mystery and pushed back the specter of death made the other Pharmholders back down.

Ultimately, Zora and Marcus didn't trust the work of the decon crew. They had to do their own investigation. Nothing else would convince them it was okay. The sensors had to be replaced, and that wasn't cheap. But they had a home. They had a place for Sekou to play, and grow.

Sekou didn't get his camera back from the municipality of Borealopolis, but Marcus traded a packet of new freeze-resistant seeds for an antique chemistry set, and that seemed to satisfy the boy.

Why had Valkiri been willing to make her victims homeless but not actually murder them? Zora never figured it out. Marcus said it was because she was afraid that if she had really breached the nuke, their home corp would have charged her with murder. Or maybe she was afraid she herself would be in danger if she sabotaged the nuke.

Or maybe she had some ethics, said Marcus. He always said things like that. Seeing both sides. Zora found it exasperating. Ultimately, though, it made him lovable.

* * * *

The baby, a girl, was pretty and small, always quite small, for her age, but with big eyes favoring Zora's and a sly smile favoring Marcus's. Zora treasures a digital image of the two children, boy and girl, taken soon after the birth.

But Marcus prefers the quite deft drawing Sekou did of the family, though of course, as the artist, he put himself in the picture wielding a camera that by that time rusted in a crime lab in Borealopolis.

FOOD FOR FRIENDSHIP, by E. C. Tubb

"The trouble with adventure," said Robeson feelingly, "is that it isn't what it's made out to be."

"Is anything?" Smyth, he insisted on being different, stared wistfully at the globular fruits suspended in the branches of the tree beneath which they rested.

"No," admitted Robeson. "And there you have the whole trouble with civilization. Adventure is a snare, a delusion, a tarnished bauble, a lying promise of freedom. Strangled in the economic rat-race of his own world, a man sells up, buys a ticket to some distant place, and ventures on the sea of space in search of the road to adventure." He was raising his metaphors but didn't let it worry him. "And then what happens? He finds himself worse off than before, caught in a vicious trap baited by his own necessity. Adventure! I'm sick of it!"

"I'm hungry," said Smyth.

"So am I," said Robeson. Together, they stared at the succulent fruits hanging just above their heads.

They didn't eat them, of course; they knew better. It wasn't morals that stopped them from reaching up and helping themselves. They had long since discarded such troublesome concepts as to the sanctity of other people's property. They didn't eat the fruits for the simple reason that, if they did, they would die in a most unpleasant and distressing manner.

"The Tortures of Tantalus had nothing on this place." With difficulty Robeson looked away from the fruits. "I can think of few things worse than for a starving man to be stranded on Mirab IV."

"Or Sirus II."

"Or Vega VIII."

"Or on Lochis, Mephisto, Wendis or Thrombo." Smyth rolled the words as if uttering a curse. "Or, in fact, on most planets of this triple-blasted universe."

Robeson nodded, too despondent to do anything else. The universe was huge, filled with planets and swarming with the Hy-Drive ships of a score of races. Most of the planets had the right gravitation, the right atmosphere and the right temperature for Terrestrial life. But for every thousand planets on which men could live without protection only one had the essential ingredient for colonization. Only one in a thousand could grow edible food.

It was the minerals which did it, that, and the subtle variations in the radiation received from the sun. Earth-like plants grew in profusion, but the apples were poisoned with selenium, the lettuces loaded with arsenic, the corn contained copper or some other mineral

in the right proportions for the adapted plant but the wrong proportions for human metabolism.

On such worlds men grew their own food in shielded hydroponic installations or starved.

* * * *

The factor in charge of the food plant on Mirab IV was a dour, sandy-haired man who was firm in the belief that hard work was the destiny of the human race. Especially such members of it as Robeson and Smyth. He glared at the two men: Robeson, once plump and well rounded, looking a little like a partly deflated balloon; Smyth, always a small man, resembling a wizened gnome.

"So you're hungry, are you?"

McKief felt a sense of his own power. He crushed it. "Well?"

"You're supposed to provide food for any Terrestrial requiring it," said Robeson, the self-elected spokesman. "We require it."

"I'm supposed to sell food to any Terrestrial requiring it," corrected McKief. "This isn't a charity station." He looked hopeful. "Can you pay?"

"No." Robeson was firm. "We spent all our money in that hash-house you run. Now they won't feed us any more."

"Spent all your money, have you?" McKief rocked gently back on his heels. "Waiting for a ship, I suppose, to carry you to some other world." He shook his head. "Well, well."

"It isn't well," snapped Robeson. "We're starving."

"Then you'll be wanting a job." McKief couldn't ever appear genial, but he was doing his best. Labor, on such backwoods planets as Mirab IV was scarce, and even such a pair of misfits as these two would be valuable. He pretended to consider, stroking his lantern jaw. "Let me see, now. Maybe I could use a couple of tank cleaners. Five-year contract at a credit a day plus keep." He pulled a couple of printed forms from his pocket. "Just sign and thumbprint these and you can start at once."

"No." Robeson had no intention of signing away the next five years of his life. "We're a couple of distressed spacemen," he claimed. "You've got to feed us."

"Got your papers?" McKief didn't wait for an answer. "I know you haven't. You were kicked off the last Terrestrial ship to land here. You're a pair of drifters, no-good space tramps dodging your responsibilities and shaming the entire human race before the aliens with your shiftlessness. You won't get any free help from me." He altered his tactics. "Just sign and everything will be all right. There's

chicken for supper, with fresh green peas and mashed potatoes, with apple pie to follow. And coffee, real coffee, with real sugar and cream. For breakfast, there's…"

"No," said Robeson hastily. Smyth, he could tell, was weakening.

"Have it your way," snapped McKief. "A meal will cost you a credit. Basic menu: a plate of yeast and a hunk of soy-flour bread. Take it or leave it."

"We can't take it," said Robeson. "We haven't any money. But we aren't going to sign any contract, either. Under the Regs we're allowed to work off the cost of our food."

"So you're a space lawyer, are you?" McKief looked disgusted. "I might have known it. All right, as you're so smart, you can report to the tank super. You'll get a meal for a fair day's work. Now get moving, the sight of you makes me ashamed of my race."

Smyth didn't move. "Please," he said weakly. "Couldn't we eat first?"

"You work, and then you eat." McKief was firm. "Of course, if you'd like to change your mind and sign the contract…"

Robeson led his partner away before he could yield to temptation.

* * * *

"That McKief," said Robeson thoughtfully, "is a louse." He prodded at the unsavory chunk of yeast swimming in a watery pool of its own natural juices, which lay on a tin plate before him. "A first-class louse," he amended. "The king of them all."

"Don't you want that?" Smyth swallowed his last crumb of soy-flour bread and reached towards his partner's neglected meal.

"Of course I don't want it." Robeson snatched away his plate. "But I need it. I owe it to myself to look after my health." He chewed distastefully on the unappetizing mass. "You know, I've the conviction that if I were to collapse while at my arduous duties I'd recover to find a roast chicken before me—and my thumbprint on that contract." He took another bite. "And then we'd never get away from this place."

Smyth shuddered at the prospect. For ten days, now, the two had worked like robots cleaning the great hydroponic tanks of dying and odorous vegetable matter. The tank super, a contract man himself, had no time or patience to spare for any who refused to share his misery. So he piled on the work and made them sweat out the food he grudgingly gave them at the end of the day.

"You know," said Smyth wistfully, "we could afford at least one decent meal."

"We daren't," said Robeson. "Once we taste good food again we'll

be lost. We need every cent of that money to beg, buy or bribe a passage on the first ship leaving here for a Class X world. Class X," he repeated wonderingly. "Food growing everywhere. Orchards, truck gardens, chicken coops, the works and every last bit of it fit to eat." He sighed and scraped up the last of his yeast. "Besides, if McKief guesses that we've got money he'll make us buy food until we're broke. Then he'll have us where he wants us."

"Chicken," said Smyth dreamily. "Green peas, mashed potatoes." He licked his lips.

"Five years of sweating for the sake of your stomach," reminded Robeson.

"At a credit a day," pointed out Smyth.

"Man?" said Robeson sternly, "is not made for bread alone. There are other things. Could you go five years without a drink? You couldn't, and as soon as you taste it you'll want more and more. You'll even start smoking again. You'll wind up a slave to expensive vices and spend your money as fast as you get it." He picked at his teeth. "At the end of the contract time you'll be flat broke and have to sign up for another five years."

"But I'll eat," said Smyth. "The way things are I'm no better off."

"We've got money," reminded Robeson. "I've got fifty-three credits and you've got forty-nine. While we hang onto that we've got economic independence. With any sort of luck at all it will pay our passage to a Class X world. Then you can eat until you burst."

"So you keep telling me." Smyth was hungry and irritable. "But when?"

The tank super came roaring in just then, and saved Robeson from what could have been an argument.

"Overtime," he ordered. "A ship's due in tomorrow and McKief wants the supplies all ready for loading. You can start humping right away." He stormed out again, yelling to others. Robeson stared at Smyth.

You heard that? A Terrestrial ship's due in tomorrow. Brother, this is it!"

Smyth rubbed his stomach in anticipation.

* * * *

The plan was simple, masterly, logical, and contained a touch of elementary genius. The only thing wrong with it was that it didn't work. Robeson stared sourly at McKief, then climbed, with what dignity he could muster, from the bag of flour. The white powder didn't improve his appearance.

"I suppose," he said bitterly, "you think you're smart."

"Smart enough not to let these good people load up a couple of stowaways," snapped the factor. He stood back as Robeson dusted himself down. Smyth, looking more harassed than ever, stared wistfully at the soaring bulk of the Terrestrial Hy-Drive ship. A grinning quartermaster supervised the loading of supplies while a couple of Rigelians looked on. The Rigelians had arrived at the same time as the Terrestrials and their ship was unloading supplies for the Rigelian station.

"I suspected what was going on when I checked the sacks." McKief believed in rubbing it in. "You knew that the quartermaster wouldn't argue about two bags extra on the manifest." He glowered at the unhappy pair. "Do I have to remind you of the penalties for stowing away?"

"Shut up," said Robeson. He knew the penalties, but he also knew that a little money to the right person would have closed the right eyes. Hy-Drive ships were fast and it would have been simple to remain under cover for the few days necessary to reach another world. He walked up to an officer. "Where are you bound, sir?"

"Klargush then on to Perlon."

"Perlon's Class X, isn't it?"

Robeson looked hopeful. "Could you use a couple of good men? I can cook and Smyth makes a good steward."

"No." The officer didn't like would-be stowaways and didn't bother to hide the fact.

"How much would passage cost then? For the two of us?"

"Two hundred and fifty each, basic rations provided."

"We can raise a hundred. How about taking it, signing us on as crew and forgetting to book the passage?" Robeson winked. "We won't complain."

"Not a chance." The officer glanced at McKief. "Sorry, fully-paid passage only on this ship." He walked away to confer with the factor. Robeson glared after him.

"If there's one thing I hate more than another," he said feelingly, "it's an honest man. Look at him! Turning down the chance of an easy hundred just for the sake of a principle."

"He's scared of McKief," said Smyth. "Maybe we'd better sign that contract now? That officer's telling McKief we've got money. If we volunteer to sign maybe he'll let us keep it."

"Not McKief," said Robeson positively. "The man's a sadist; he'll make us spend it first. Anyway, it's a matter of personal pride. I refuse to be beaten by a louse like McKief."

Smyth didn't say anything; he was too busy listening to the rumblings from his empty stomach.

* * * *

"I don't like it," said Smyth. "I don't like it at all."

"So you don't like it." Robcson was impatient. "Now tell me what else we can do?"

It was two days later and Robeson's prediction had proved correct. McKief had gently shaken his head when they had reported for work, pointing out that they weren't really distressed, as they had money, and regretting that he couldn't accommodate them under the Regs. On the other hand, if they were to sign the; five-year contract, they could live like kings. Robeson had dragged his partner away when the factor had casually started talking about the menu.

"I've fixed everything," he said. "The Rigelians will sell passage to one man for one hundred credits. We've got that. Naturally, as it's an alien ship, I'll have to provide my own food. That's where you come in."

"I don't like it," repeated Smyth. "Why can't I have the passage?"

Robeson sighed as he stared at his partner. At times Smyth appeared really dumb. The commissary problems were such that no one ship could provide food for any and all races who might want passage; So food was provided only for the members of the race operating the ship. Others were given a cubicle and water, and left to provide their own food. It was a system that worked perfectly. It would work now if Smyth would reasonable.

"I'm the biggest," pointed out Robeson. "Also I've put in the most cash. But I don't see what you've got to worry about. The trip is scheduled to last three days and we can last that long. All I have to do is carry you into the ship and claim that you're my provisions. Simple."

"Maybe." Smyth still wasn't happy. "But why me?"

"Could you carry me?" Robeson snorted and shook out a sack he had found at the hydroponic station. "Come on now, no more arguing. With any sort of luck at all we'll be on our way within the hour."

The Rigelian on duty at the airlock stared curiously at Robeson as he came puffing up the ramp, a sack slung over his shoulder.

"Paid passenger to Perlon," he gasped, extending his ticket. The Rigelian examined it, found it in order and uttered the customary warning.

"Passage only sold liable to alteration on route." His translator clicked and hummed. "You have provided yourself with supplies?"

"I have." Robeson opened the sack. "You want to see?"

The Rigelian leaned forward, two of his eyes extending themselves as he peered into the sack. Smyth, his skin blackened with charcoal, his hair clipped and his hands bound, glared up at the alien.

Robeson swallowed, hoping that the deception would work.

It did. The eating habits of other races were varied and strange. The Rigelians themselves ate mineral salts, the Vegans a mass of quivering, opalescent jelly. The guard saw nothing strange in a live, animal-form being used as food. The disguise was sufficient to make Smyth, to a Rigelian, utterly different from a normal Terrestrial. Also he fell into the essential weight-restriction that no food supply could be greater than the body-weight of the passenger.

"You may enter," hummed the translator. "Take-off within the hour."

Safe inside the cubicle, Robeson released his partner and wiped the sweat from his face and neck. Talking was out; a man doesn't hold discussions with his food, but both gave a sigh of relief as the ship lifted and the familiar twisting sensation told of the operation of the Hy-Drive.

"Three days," whispered Robeson. "Then we eat."

"Just enough time to work up a really sharp appetite," agreed Smyth, also in a whisper. He fell silent as the door slid open. A Rigelian entered the room.

"We regret to inform you," clicked the translator, "of a change in schedule. We have been re-routed to Lundis, a journey of twenty days. I trust that your food supply will be sufficient."

THE LIFE WORK OF PROFESSOR MUNTZ, by Murray Leinster

Nobody would ordinarily have thought of Mr. Grebb and Professor Muntz in the same breath, so to speak, yet their careers impinged upon each other remarkably. Mr. Grebb was a large, coarse person, with large coarse manners and large coarse pores on an oversized nose. He drove a beer truck for the Ajax Brewing Company, and his one dominant desire was to get something on Joe Hallix, who as head of the delivery service for Ajax, was his immediate boss.

Professor Muntz, on the other hand, was the passionately shy and mouselike author of *The Mathematics of Multiple Time-Tracks,* who vanished precipitately when he found himself famous. In that abstruse work he referred worriedly to experimental evidence of parallel time-tracks, and other physicists converged upon him with hopeful gleams in their eyes, and he fled.

Professor Muntz couldn't talk to people. But they wanted to know about his experiments. They couldn't make any. They didn't know how to start, and to them the whole thing had been abstract theory. But he had made experiments and they wanted to ask about them, so he ran away in an agony of shyness.

That was that. No one human being could seem less likely to be affected by Professor Muntz' life-work than Mr. Grebb, and no life-work could seem more certainly immune to Mr. Grebb than Professor Muntz'. But life is full of paradoxes, and the theory of multiple time-tracks is even fuller. Therefore…

Mr. Grebb waked when his alarm clock rang stridently beside his ear. His eyes still closed, he numbly reached out a large, hairy ham of a hand and threw the alarm clock fiercely, across the room. But it was a very tough alarm clock. It continued to ring in a far corner, battered and bruised, its glass long gone, and dented so that it had a rakish and completely disreputable appearance. But it rang defiantly. It rang stridently. It rang naggingly. Its tone seemed to have something of the quality of a Bronx cheer.

Its tumult penetrated to the sleep drugged recesses of what Mr. Grebb considered his brain. It reminded him of the hour. Of the bright and merry sunshine. It was a clarion call to duty and the service of the Ajax Brewing Company. And in that context it was a reminder of the existence of Joe Hallix, and it was a raspberry.

* * * *

Mr. Grebb opened one vaguely bloodshot eye. Rage appeared in it. The other eye opened. Fury developed. He swore heavily at the name and thought of Joe Hallix, who would have him docked if he were late. The alarm clock-rang on, jeering.

Mr. Grebb got out of bed, rumbling bitterly, and put on his clothes. He slept in his underwear, so he had merely to pull on his pants, slide into a brightly-checked flannel shirt, and pull on his shoes. He went down to breakfast, glowering.

His landlady discreetly served him coffee without even a good-morning. She presented a huge stack of pancakes and vast quantities of sausage. He ate, largely and coarsely. He finished up the pancakes with thick molasses, wiping up his plate. He drank more coffee. A certain gloomy peace descended upon him.

"Mr. Grebb—" said his landlady hopefully.

He scowled, then remembered that his board was paid. He relaxed and fumbled out a cigarette which looked very small in his hairy fingers. "Yeah?"

"I wondered if I could ask your advice," his landlady went on. "I don't know anything about machinery, Mr. Grebb, and I thought you'd know all about it, being you drive a truck."

Mr. Grebb was pleased at the tribute.

"The lodger who had your room, Mr. Grebb," said the landlady, "was a very nice little man. But one day he dodged a truck and jumped in front of a bus, and they took him to the hospital and he died there. And the police came and took his things to pay the hospital bill and to try to find his family. I don't know if they did. And I was so flustered about him getting killed like that that I forget about him owing me a week's board, and I didn't think about the box until I went down in the cellar yesterday and noticed it."

Mr. Grebb's hand caressed his stomach. He loosened his belt a trifle.

"Yeah?" he said encouragingly.

"He had a box he asked to have put down in the cellar, and I forgot to tell the police about it. But he did owe me a week's board. So yesterday when I noticed the box I peeked in between the slats, and it's a sort of machine. So I thought I'd get you to look at it. If it's valuable I'll tell the police and they can sell it and maybe pay me what he owed me."

"Huh!" said Mr. Grebb. "Them cops! Grafters, all of 'em! You keep the thing. Use it. What's the difference?"

"I don't know what it's for," said the landlady. "Would you look at it, Mr. Grebb?"

"Sure!" said Mr. Grebb amiably. "If it's valuable I guess I know a place to sell it."

As a matter of fact, he did not. But he figured that somewhere among his acquaintances he could find somebody who would know how to sell almost anything with no questions asked, and he estimated that this landlady would take his word for what he sold it for. Which should mean a quick buck or two. The thought was cheering.

"I got a coupla minutes," he said generously. "I'll look now."

He followed his landlady down the rickety cellar stairs. He saw the crate. He did not bother to read the express tag on it, or he would have seen that it was addressed to Professor Aldous Muntz at this street and number. He wouldn't have thought of *The Mathematics of Multiple Time-Tracks* at that, though. He knew nothing of abstruse speculations on the nature of space and time and reality. But the landlady turned on a drop-light and he poked at the paper wrapping inside the crate.

There were many wires. There were two or three radio tubes. There were transformer coils, and there was a row of dials marked, Milliamperes, Kilovolts, and so on.

He pulled away the crating boards. He saw that it was not a factory-made contrivance. It was not enclosed in a mass-production case. All the works were in plain view, though some were swathed in protective coverings. To Mr. Grebb it looked vaguely like a home-made radio. He was disappointed.

The doorbell rang upstairs. The landlady said: "I'd better answer the bell. You just look it over, Mr. Grebb."

She went up. Mr. Grebb shook his head sadly. It was not something that could be sold at a standard hot-goods price, with a profit for himself. But he saw an extension cord with a bayonet plug at the end. He pulled it out and plugged it into the outlet of the dangling cellar light.

Nothing happened. There was a row of switches. He poked one or two, experimentally. Still nothing happened. He did not hear music or even an enthusiastic voice telling of the marvelous new product, Reeko, a refined deodorant and double your money back if your best friends can smell you. The machine remained inert and useless. He did not notice that a tiny dial went over to "20" on the milliampere scale and to "19.6" on the kilovolt dial.

He turned and lumbered upstairs, disgusted. Not a chance for a sudden buck. Which was just his kind of luck, he thought. Like having Joe Hallix for a boss.

"I ain't got time to look it over good," he told his landlady. "I'll see about it later."

He put on his hat and windbreaker and went out the front door. He saw the morning paper on the porch. He picked it up and stuffed it in his pocket. It belonged to his landlady, but she had not seen him

take it. It would be convenient to read on the bus. He had to run to get to the corner on time. He thought of Hallix who would raise the devil if he were late to work. He breathed heavily in his indignation at the existence of people like Joe Hallix who would get him fired if he had half a chance. Presently he got out the newspaper.

He read, quite unsuspicious. The newspaper, had he known it, was unique. It was quite the most remarkable newspaper on the whole world. It was the direct result of a milliammeter reading of twenty and a kilovolt reading of nineteen-point-six on the device down in the cellar of his landlady's home.

This newspaper said that "Undertaker Joe" had beaten "Goatface Jim" at the wrestling matches last night. It said that the Rangers had won, 6-3, in last night's night game. It said that Carribee had romped home first in the fourth race, paying seven for two. Mr. Grebb was pained. He stuffed the paper in the crack of the seat beside him. He fell into bitter meditation on the undesirable characteristics of Joe Hallix.

In time, he got off the bus, the bus-conductor gathered up the paper with other trash and heaved it into the trash box at the end of the line, and it was lost forever. Which was regrettable, because all other copies of the morning paper said that Goatface Jim had won over Undertaker Joe, that the Pilots beat the Rangers 5-3, and that Mooncalf won in the fourth race, paying three for two. The foreign news was different, too, the political news was subtly unlike, and the financial news was peculiar. But Mr. Grebb did not notice.

That day he drove his truck, and got into three arguments with customers, two with Joe Hallix, and almost had a fight with a friend who insisted that Goatface Jim had won the wrestling match. Mr. Grebb was furious when his friend's newspaper checked. It was apparently the same edition of the same paper he'd read, but it didn't say the same things. He considered that it had betrayed him.

Actually, the paper was the result of Professor Muntz' apparatus for experiment in multiple time-tracks. But Mr. Grebb had never heard of Professor Muntz except as a lodger who'd dodged a truck and jumped in front of a bus. He certainly had never heard of multiple time-tracks and surely could not have imagined experiments in that field.

But very many eminent scientists would have given much to read that newspaper, and the contrivance in the cellar could have been sold to any of half a dozen research institutions for tens of thousands of dollars. But Mr. Grebb didn't even guess at such a thing, and he went to bed that night in a very gloomy mood.

Next morning the alarm clock jerked him awake and he went downstairs filled with bitterness at the fate which made him get up

and gave him Joe Hallix as a boss. His landlady dared not address him even after he was fed.

He stamped dourly out the front door. There was the morning paper. He stooped to pick it up. As he bent over, there was the thump of a rolled-up paper landing. Then there were two papers on the porch. Mr. Grebb jumped, and turned scowling to glare at the paper-boy who apparently had almost hit him. But there was no paper-boy in sight. The paper seemed to have materialized out of empty air. Mr. Grebb growled anathemas at fool boys who hid, and went to his bus.

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Today's paper did not deceive him. Today, his oracular comments on sporting events went unchallenged. But he had a furious argument with Joe Hallix. The delivery boss was riding him. Mr. Grebb fumed and muttered all day. When he got home, his landlady said uneasily:

"Mr. Grebb, did you see the paper?"

He growled inarticulately.

"There's a piece in it about Mr. Muntz," said the landlady. "You know, the lodger who had your room and was hit by a bus? They call him Professor Muntz and say he lives here! But the policemen told me that he died in the hospital. I don't know what to think!"

Mr. Grebb remembered vaguely a newspaper which had told him lies. Yesterday's paper. It had appeared out of thin air and it did not tell the truth. Today, the paper that appeared from nowhere had been left behind. But he had no theory. He merely growled:

"Don't believe them newspapers. They print a lot of hooey!"

From his experience of the day before, the remark was justified. But he did not think of the machine in the cellar. Which was a pity, because Mr. Grebb and his landlady too would have been clasped to the bosom of anybody who understood *The Mathematics of Multiple Time-Tracks* and found out about that machine or the newspapers either.

The theory of multiple time-tracks is, in effect, that since there are a great number of really possible futures, that there are a great number of possibly real presents. If a dozen futures are equally possible, they are equally real, and there is no reason to assume that all of them but one cease to have any validity merely because we experience that one as the present.

The theory says that there is no evidence that the present moment of our experience is the only present moment that exists. That reality may be multiple, and that if you toss a coin for a decision, resolving that if it comes heads you will propose to Mabel and to Helen if it

comes tails, there exist two futures in which each event can happen, and possibly after the tossing there exist two present moments in which each event does.

And thus it followed that if Professor Muntz jumped out of the way of a truck, immediately before him there was one future in which he was hit by a bus, and another in which he was not. So that a person who understood Professor Muntz' work, and knew about the machine down in the cellar, would immediately have concluded that the newspaper came from a time-track in which Professor Muntz' attempt to dodge the truck had been wholly successful.

But Mr. Grebb did not even speculate about such things. Instead, at supper he described at length and bitterly just what part of a horse's anatomy most resembled Joe Hallix. He explained in great detail just how Joe Hallix had gotten all the delivery slips mixed up so that he, Mr. Grebb, had almost been charged with the loss of four kegs of beer. And afterward he went out to a tavern and had half a dozen beers and grew more embittered as he thought upon his wrongs.

Next morning was cloudy when he went out the front door. There was one paper on the porch. There was a large wet space in the small front yard, and part of the porch was soaking wet. Mr. Grebb picked up the paper, dourly wondering who the devil had been using a hose when it looked like rain anyhow. Then there was a plopping sound, and a second paper appeared out of nowhere and smacked close by Mr. Grebb. He looked indignantly for the boy. He was invisible. There was no boy. The newspaper had come from nowhere.

Mr. Grebb picked it up, too, and went belligerently out to the street to find the paper boy and tell him to stop playing tricks. Mr. Grebb's brain was not analytical. When something happened which he did not understand, he assumed aggrievedly that somebody was acting smart. He rumbled wrathfully at his failure to find anybody, and went heavily off to the bus.

On the bus he unfolded one newspaper. He glanced at the headlines and was bored. He shoved it down beside him and seethed over the remembrance of the four kegs of beer he had been accused of mislaying the previous day.

Presently he unfolded the second paper, forgetting the first. The headlines were not the same. He blinked, remembered, and retrieved the first paper. The mastheads were identical. The date was identical. A minor story was identical. But where the headlines differed, they contradicted each other. One said that the local front-page criminal trial had ended in acquittal for the lady who murdered her husband with a boy-scout axe. The other said that she had been convicted and would appeal.

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It did not occur to Mr. Grebb that the jurymen might have been tossing coins, and that the two papers were the results, respectively, of a coin coming heads and the same coin coming tails. He regarded the two papers with enormous indignation. He checked the inner pages. Again they differed and contradicted each other. Some few items were the same, and the advertisements seemed to match, but the two copies of the same newspaper for the same date treated the same events as if they had happened on different worlds.

Which they had. In different time-tracks, at any rate. One newspaper outlined the events in a world in which metaphorically all coins tossed heads, and the other world in which tails invariably turned up. The scores of the ball games were different. The racing results—for the same races—were different.

Mr. Grebb furiously tore both papers to shreds and rumbled to himself of the perfidy of newspapers in general and this sheet in particular.

But he had no time to meditate upon it that day. The matter of the four kegs of beer came up again. Mr. Grebb was requested to explain. Purple with fury, he bellowed. Joe Hallix was not the questioner, today. Somebody from the bookkeeping department of the Ajax Brewing Company asked involved and insulting questions.

Mr. Grebb roared defiance. He ran his truck his way! Them delivery slips were crazy, anyhow. Customers weren't complaining, were they? They got what they ordered and what was put on his truck, didn't they? If Joe Hallix got things all messed up, it wasn't his fault! He took the beer where he was told to take it! Them four kegs…

He steamed to himself as he drove out of the brewery with a fresh load. He'd pinned that bookkeeper guy's ears back, all right! Thought he was smart, huh? Said he was going to check back on earlier deliveries. The devil with him! Let him check all he wanted!

But Mr. Grebb was privately worried. As he swore to himself, he drove his truck with greater insolence and abandon even than usual. And he fretted. Because the system of delivery slips was complicated. He had never fathomed all its intricacies. He had devised, instead, a system of magnificent simplicity for his own guidance, which magnificently ignored the piddling details of paperwork. He delivered the beer. But he was belligerently uneasy.

When he returned to his boarding-house he was loudly and fulsomely enraged. The bookkeeper guy had been at him again. Not only the four kegs from yesterday were now in question. Two from the day before and one from the day before that and three from another day earlier still.

The bookkeeper talked with asperity. Threateningly. He hadn't any proof yet, he said, but it looked very queer. There was a lot of beer missing. Mr. Grebb, said the bookkeeper, had messed up his delivery slips so thoroughly that it was not possible yet to guess how much beer had gone astray. Maybe only sixty or seventy kegs, but it might have been going on for months.

Mr. Grebb went to his favorite tavern that night and literally bellowed his opinion of Joe Hallix to the world. Joe Hallix had done this to him! Joe Hallix had mixed up his delivery slips just to get him in trouble. Joe Hallix was a man of minute character indeed, to hear Mr. Grebb tell it.

Meanwhile, down in the cellar of his landlady's house, a device of coils and wires and radio tubes reposed inert and forgotten. But a needle on one tiny dial pointed to twenty milliamperes, and another dial registered nineteen-point-six kilovolts.

And in a certain area in a certain direction from that device there were strictly local rain-showers in a space no more than twenty feet across. Sometimes the rain fell there when it wasn't raining anywhere else. It was exactly as if that small twenty-foot circle were somewhere connected with another weather process—or a time-track—so that it received rain quite independently of the ground about it.

Naturally, nobody noticed it. It was night and everything was rain-wet to begin with, and nobody would have understood, anyhow.

A couple of hundred miles away, however, there were people who would have understood it, if they'd known. There had been much learned discussion of *The Mathematics of Multiple Time-Tracks,* and as Mr. Grebb bellowed his fury in a tavern around the corner from his boarding house, an eminent mathematician was making an address to a scientific society.

"Professor Muntz has disappeared," he announced regretfully, "and his disappearance is clearly the result of his excessive shyness. However, the references to experimental evidence in his work have borne fruit. He speaks of interdimensional stresses leading to a tendency of disparate time-streams to coalesce. Then he observes that experimental evidence throws some of his equations into question. A careful study of his equations has disclosed a trivial error in assumption which, when corrected, modifies his equations into accord with the experimental results he mentions.

"There can be no doubt that he has achieved experimental proof of the reality of time-streams, of whole systems of reality, which are parallel to but separate from the reality we know. And what does that mean? It means that if we miss a train in this reality, somewhere there is a cosmos in which we catch it. A thief who has been undetected in the universe we know, has somewhere made some slip which has led

to his discovery."

The learned scientist went on and on with his speech, two hundred miles from where Mr. Grebb bellowed to his tavern companions of the iniquity of Joe Hallix.

Next morning, Mr. Grebb was bleary-eyed and morose. He almost lacked appetite. He ate only twelve pancakes and almost forced himself to mop up the plate. He was uneasy. If sixty or seventy kegs of beer were missing, due to his fine scorn of bookkeeping details, he was in a bad fix. If that bookkeeper guy hunted back for six months or so and found even more missing—well, that would make it right serious. Mr. Grebb was ready to weep with vexation and terror of jail.

But he went out of the front door. Keeping gallantly to established custom even in this time of stress, he stooped for the newspaper his landlady paid for and sadly complained she never received. As he bent over, there was a loud slapping noise. A rolled-up newspaper hit him a resounding whack in the seat of the pants.

He roared, grabbed it, and plunged for the street to avenge the indignity. But there was no paper-boy anywhere about. The paper had materialized in mid-air above a twenty-foot circle which yesterday had received rain independently of neighboring territory.

Mr. Grebb was formidable as he marched at last toward his bus. He was large and coarse and infuriated. He rode on the bus, scowling. A fat woman stood beside his seat. She glared at him because he did not offer his place to a fat lady. He unfolded a newspaper to intercept the glare. A minor headline caught his eye:

AJAX BREWERY VICTIMIZED

Underneath was a news-item. More than four hundred kegs of beer had cleverly been diverted from the regular channels of trade during the past six months. Unscrupulous customers had bought them at cut rates from a dishonest employee.

Irregularities had been suspected, and on the previous day a bookkeeper, checking up, had quite accidentally looked in a drawer containing office-supplies in the delivery director's desk. He found there, casually hidden, forged delivery slips used to cover past diversions, and other delivery slips made ready for use in future thefts. Confronted with the evidence, Joe Hallix had confessed to a six-months' career in the racket and had been placed under arrest.

Mr. Grebb stared blankly. The item was infinitely plausible, but it simply was not true. That had not happened yesterday. When he left the brewery the bookkeeper was still frankly suspicious of him.

Then, suddenly, Mr. Grebb's mouth dropped open. His mental processes were never clear, so he did not reason. But the newspaper story was exactly what he would like to believe, and therefore he was convinced instantly that this was exactly what Joe Hallix had been doing.

* * * *

He became filled with a bellicose triumph. The newspaper slipped from his hands and fell to the floor of the bus, to be trampled on and soiled and so ultimately to go unglanced-at into a trash box. But Mr. Grebb steamed. So that was what Joe Hallix was doing! And he was blaming the missing beer on an innocent truck-driver of utter integrity —on Mr. Grebb himself!

He stalked into the warehouse with magnificent dignity, to find himself confronted by Joe Hallix, by the bookkeeper, and by two other men of ominous aspect.

"Look here, Grebb!" said the bookkeeper sternly. "I worked all night on this thing! There's four hundred kegs of beer missing in the past six months! Every record is straight but yours? Your delivery slips are a mess! What've you been putting over?"

Mr. Grebb breathed heavily.

"Me," said Mr. Grebb dramatically, "I been thinkin'! Thinkin' about why my records always get jammed up an' why Joe Hallix always keeps pickin' on me an' ripenin' me up for a fall guy for him! Any of the other drivers will tell you I'm a right guy, an' any one of 'em will tell you he's a crook!"

The bookkeeper interrupted impatiently, but Mr. Grebb bellowed him down.

"Look in his desk!" he roared in righteous wrath. "Look where he keeps his blank forms! You'll find the whole works right there! Right in this here drawer!"

He thumped with a hairy ham of a hand, breathing in snorts of indignation.

Joe Hallix tried to laugh scornfully. But it wasn't good. That Mr. Grebb, of all humans, should have hit so instantly and with such uncanny accuracy upon the hiding-place of papers he had to have handy for the working of his racket, and which nobody in the world should ever have thought of looking for, was simply beyond belief. It was too sudden and too startling and too starkly impossible.

Joe Hallix tried to laugh it off, but sweat poured out on his forehead. When the bookkeeper, after one look at his graying face, stooped to pull out the drawer, Joe Hallix got panicky. And the two

ominous gentlemen turned their attention to him.

Mr. Grebb returned to his boarding house in a mood of triumphant indignation. He was as near to perfect happiness as he would ever get. Joe Hallix was unmasked and headed for jail, and he, Mr. Grebb, was proven innocent as a babe unborn. Moreover, that half-keg of beer he had managed to get away with, two months before, would never be charged against him.

He was magnificent in his sensations of vindicated purity. He told his landlady about it at supper. But he did not mention the newspaper. He did not understand that, and therefore he ignored it. She listened admiringly.

"I always knew you were smart, Mr. Grebb," she said with conviction. "That's why I asked you about that machine down in the basement. Did you ever get time to look at it again, Mr. Grebb?"

"It's no good," said Mr. Grebb largely. "It's just some stuff put together crazy. It don't work."

"Too bad," said the landlady. "And I've let it clutter up my cellar all this time."

"I'll get it out for you," said Mr. Grebb, generously. "Give it a couple kicks to get it in two pieces so I can handle it easy, an' I'll pile it out on the sidewalk for the garbage man to haul away."

Which, out of the kindness of his heart, he did. It is still a mystery in high scientific circles just what Professor Muntz did with himself, and what sort of experimental apparatus he had to back his work in *The Mathematics of Multiple Time-Tracks.* Some eminent scientists still hope he will turn up eventually, in spite of his passionate shyness. It is not likely, because he jumped out of the way of a truck and landed in front of a bus. In this time-track, at any rate. Perhaps in another, different conditions prevail. But life and the theory of multiple time-tracks are full of paradoxes.

In this time-track the paradox was that nobody would ordinarily think of Mr. Grebb and Professor Muntz in the same breath, so to speak, yet their careers most curiously impinged upon each other. Mr. Grebb was driving the truck that Professor Muntz dodged when he jumped in front of the bus, and Mr. Grebb moved into the lodging Professor Muntz vacated, and Mr. Grebb kicked to pieces the device which was the Professor's life-work, and set the fragments out on the sidewalk for the garbage-man.

But Professor Muntz had his effect on Mr. Grebb, too. It was his device that brought those newspapers from another time-track and enabled Mr. Grebb to unmask the fine villainy of Joe Hallix. It is due to Professor Muntz' life-work in fact—it is its fine fruit—that Mr. Grebb still drives a truck for the Ajax Brewing Company.

TINY AND THE MONSTER, by Theodore Sturgeon

She *had* to find out about Tiny—*everything* about Tiny.

They were bound to call him Tiny. The name was good for a laugh when he was a pup, and many times afterward.

He was a Great Dane, unfashionable with his long tail, smooth and glossy in the brown coat which fit so snugly over his heavily muscled shoulders and chest. His eyes were big and brown and his feet were big and black; he had a voice like thunder and a heart ten times his own great size.

He was born in the Virgin Islands, on St. Croix, which is a land of palm trees and sugar, of soft winds and luxuriant undergrowth whispering with the stealthy passage of pheasant and mongoose. There were rats in the ruins of the ancient estate houses that stood among the foothills—ruins with slave-built walls forty inches thick and great arches of weathered stone. There was pasture land where the field mice ran, and brooks asparkle with gaudy blue minnows.

But—where in St. Croix had he learned to be so strange?

When Tiny was a puppy, all feet and ears, he learned many things. Most of these things were kinds of respect. He learned to respect that swift, vengeful piece of utter engineering called a scorpion, when one of them whipped its barbed tail into his inquiring nose. He learned to respect the heavy deadness of the air about him that preceded a hurricane, for he knew that it meant hurry and hammering and utmost obedience from every creature on the estate. He learned to respect the justice of sharing, for he was pulled from the teat and from the trough when he crowded the others of his litter. He was the largest.

These things, all of them, he learned as respects. He was never struck, and although he learned caution he never learned fear. The pain he suffered from the scorpion—it happened only once—the strong but gentle hands which curbed his greed, the frightful violence of the hurricane that followed the tense preparations—all these things and many more taught him the justice of respect. He half understood a basic ethic: namely, that he would never be asked to do something, or to refrain from doing something, unless there was a good reason for it. His obedience, then, was a thing implicit, for it was half reasoned; and since it was not based on fear, but on justice, it could not interfere with his resourcefulness.

All of which, along with his blood, explained why he was such a splendid animal. It did not explain how he learned to read. It did not

explain why Alec was compelled to sell him—not only to sell him but to search out Alistair Forsythe and sell him to her.

She *had* to find out. The whole thing was crazy. She hadn't wanted a dog. If she had wanted a dog, it wouldn't have been a Great Dane. And if it had been a Great Dane, it wouldn't have been Tiny, for he was a Crucian dog and had to be shipped all the way to Scarsdale, New York, by air.

The series of letters she sent to Alec were as full of wondering persuasion as his had been when he sold her the dog. It was through these letters that she learned about the scorpion and the hurricane, about Tiny's puppyhood and the way Alec brought up his dogs. If she learned something about Alec as well, that was understandable. Alec and Alistair Forsythe had never met, but through Tiny they shared a greater secret than many people who have grown up together.

"As for why I wrote you, of all people," Alec wrote in answer to her direct question, "I can't say I chose you at all. It was Tiny. One of the cruise-boat people mentioned your name at my place, over cocktails one afternoon. It was, as I remember, a Dr. Schwellenbach. Nice old fellow. As soon as your name was mentioned, Tiny's head came up as if I had called him. He got up from his station by the door and lolloped over to the doctor with his ears up and his nose quivering. I thought for a minute that the old fellow was offering him food, but no—he must have wanted to hear Schwellenbach say your name again, So I asked about you. A day or so later I was telling a couple of friends about it, and when I mentioned the name again, Tiny came snuffling over and shoved his nose into my hand. He was shivering. That got me. I wrote to a friend in New York who got your name and address in the phone book. You know the rest. I just wanted to tell you about it at first, but something made me suggest a sale. Somehow, it didn't seem right to have something like this going on and not have you meet Tiny. When you wrote that you couldn't get away from New York, there didn't seem to be anything else to do but send Tiny to you. And now—I don't know if I'm too happy about it. Judging from those pages and pages of questions you keep sending me, I get the idea that you are more than a little troubled by this crazy business."

She answered: *"Please* don't think I'm troubled about this! I'm not. I'm interested, and curious, and more than a little excited; but there is nothing about the situation that frightens me. I can't stress that enough. There's something around Tiny—sometimes I have the feeling it's something outside Tiny—that is infinitely comforting. I feel protected, in a strange way, and it's a different and greater thing than the protection I could expect from a large and intelligent dog. It's strange, and it's mysterious enough; but it isn't at all frightening.

“I have some more questions. Can you remember exactly what it was that Dr. Schwellenbach said the first time he mentioned my name and Tiny acted strangely? Was there ever any time that you can remember when Tiny was under some influence other than your own—something which might have given him these strange traits? What about his diet as a puppy? How many times did he get…” and so on.

And Alec answered, in part: “It was so long ago now that I can’t remember exactly; but it seems to me Dr. Schwellenbach was talking about his work. As you know, he’s a professor of metallurgy. He mentioned Professor Nowland as the greatest alloy specialist of his time—said Nowland could alloy anything with anything. Then he went on about Nowland’s assistant. Said the assistant was very highly qualified, having been one of these Science Search products and something of a prodigy; in spite of which she was completely feminine and as beautiful a redhead as had ever exchanged heaven for earth. Then he said her name was Alistair Forsythe. (I hope you’re not blushing, Miss Forsythe; you asked for this!) And then it was that Tiny ran over to the doctor in that extraordinary way.

“The only time I can think of when Tiny was off the estate and possibly under some influence was the day old Debbil disappeared for a whole day with the pup when he was about three months old. Debbil is one of the characters who hang around here. He’s a Crucian about sixty years old, a piratical-looking old gent with one eye and elephantiasis. He shuffles around the grounds running odd errands for anyone who will give him tobacco or a shot of white rum. Well, one morning I sent him over the hill to see if there was a leak in the water line that runs from the reservoir. It would only take a couple of hours, so I told him to take Tiny for a run.

“They were gone for the whole day. I was shorthanded and busy as a squirrel in a nuthouse and didn’t have a chance to send anyone after him. But he drifted in toward evening. I bawled him out thoroughly. It was no use asking him where he had been; he’s only about quarter-witted anyway. He just claimed he couldn’t remember, which is pretty usual for him. But for the next three days I was busy with Tiny. He wouldn’t eat, and he hardly slept at all. He just kept staring out over the cane fields at the hill. He didn’t seem to want to go there at all. I went out to have a look. There’s nothing out that way but the reservoir and the old ruins of the governor’s palace, which have been rotting out there in the sun for the last century and a half. Nothing left now but an overgrown mound and a couple of arches, but it’s supposed to be haunted. I forgot about it after that because Tiny got back to normal. As a matter of fact, he seemed to be better than ever, although, from then on, he would sometimes freeze and watch the hill as if he were listening to something. I haven’t attached much

importance to it until now. I still don't. Maybe he got chased by some mongoose's mother. Maybe he chewed up some ganjaweed—marijuana to you. But I doubt that it has anything to do with the way he acts now, any more than that business of the compasses that pointed west might have something to do with it. Did you hear about that, by the way? Craziest thing I ever heard of. It was right after I shipped Tiny off to you last fall, as I remember. Every ship and boat and plane from here to Sandy Hook reported that its compass began to indicate due west instead of a magnetic north! Fortunately the effect only lasted a couple of hours so there were no serious difficulties. One cruise steamer ran aground, and there were a couple of Miami fishing-boat mishaps. I only bring it up to remind both of us that Tiny's behavior may be odd, but not exclusively so in a world where such things as the crazy compasses occur."

`And in her next, she wrote: "You're quite the philosopher, aren't you? Be careful of that Fortean attitude, my tropical friend. It tends to accept the idea of the unexplainable to an extent where explaining, or even investigating, begins to look useless. As far as that crazy compass episode is concerned, I remember it well indeed. My boss, Dr. Nowland—yes, it's true, he can alloy anything with anything!—has been up to his ears in that fantastic happenstance. So have most of his colleagues in half a dozen sciences. They're able to explain it quite satisfactorily, too. It was simply the presence of some quasi-magnetic phenomenon that created a resultant field at right angles to the Earth's own magnetic influences. That solution sent the pure theorists home happy. Of course, the practical ones—Nowland and his associates in metallurgy, for example—have only to figure out what caused the field. Science is a wonderful thing.

"By the way, you will notice my change of address. I have wanted for a long time to have a little house of my own, and I was lucky enough to get this one from a friend. It's up the Hudson from New York, quite countrified, but convenient enough to the city to be practical. I'm bringing Mother here from upstate. She'll love it. And besides—as if you didn't know the most important reason when you saw it!—it gives Tiny a place to run. He's no city dog… I'd tell you that he found the house for me, too, if I didn't think that, these days, I'm crediting him with even more than his remarkable powers. Gregg and Marie Weems, the couple who had the cottage before, began to be haunted. So they said, anyway. Some indescribably horrible monster that both of them caught glimpses of, inside the house and out of it. Marie finally got the screaming meemies about it and insisted on Gregg's selling the place; housing shortage or no. They came straight to me. Why? Because they—Marie, anyway; she's a mystic little thing—had the idea that someone with a large dog would be safe in that

house. The odd part of that was that neither of them knew I had recently acquired a Great Dane. As soon as they saw Tiny they threw themselves on my neck and begged me to take the place. Marie couldn't explain the feeling she had; what she and Gregg came to my place for was to ask me to buy a big dog and take the house. Why me? Well, she just felt I would like it, that was all. It seemed the right kind of place for me. And my having the dog clinched it. Anyway, you can put that down in your notebook of unexplainables."

So it went for the better part of a year. The letters were long and frequent, and, as sometimes happens, Alec and Alistair grew very close indeed. Almost by accident, they found themselves writing letters that did not mention Tiny at all, although there were others that concerned nothing else. And, of course, Tiny was not always in the role of *canis superior*. He was a dog—all dog—and acted accordingly. His strangeness only came out at particular intervals. At first it had been at times when Alistair was most susceptible to being astonished by it—in other words, when it was least expected. Later, he would perform his odd feat when she was ready for him to do it, and under exactly the right circumstances. Later still, he became the superdog only when she asked him to…

* * * *

The cottage was on a hillside, such a very steep hillside that the view over the river overlooked the railroad, and the trains were a secret rumble and never a sight at all. There was a wild and clean air about the place—a perpetual tingle of expectancy, as though someone coming into New York for the very first time on one of the trains had thrown his joyous anticipation high in the air and the cottage had caught it and breathed it and kept it forever.

Up the hairpin driveway to the house, one spring afternoon, toiled a miniature automobile in its lowest gear. Its little motor grunted and moaned as it took the last steep grade, a miniature Old Faithful appearing around its radiator cap. At the foot of the brownstone porch steps it stopped, and a miniature lady slid out from under the wheel. But for the facts that she was wearing an aviation mechanic's coveralls, and that her very first remark—an earthy epithet directed at the steaming radiator—was neither ladylike nor miniature, she might have been a model for the more precious variety of Mother's Day greeting card.

Fuming, she reached into the car and pressed the horn button. The quavering ululation that resulted had its desired effect. It was answered instantly by the mighty howl of a Great Dane at the peak of

aural agony. The door of the house crashed open and a girl rushed out on the porch, to stand with her russet hair ablaze in the sunlight, her lips parted, and her long eyes squinting against the light reflected from the river. “What—Mother! Mother, darling—is that you? Already? Tiny!” she rapped as the dog bolted out of the open door and down the steps. “Come back here!”

The dog stopped. Mrs. Forsythe scooped a crescent wrench from the ledge behind the driver’s seat and brandished it. “Let him come, Alistair,” she said grimly. “In the name of sense, girl, what are you doing with a monster like that? I thought you said you had a dog, not a Shetland pony with fangs. If he messes with me, I’ll separate him from a couple of those twelve-pound feet and bring him down to my weight. Where do you keep his saddle? I thought there was a meat shortage in this part of the country. Whatever possessed you to take up your abode with that carnivorous dromedary, anyway? And what’s the idea of buying a barn like this, thirty miles from nowhere and perched on a precipice to boot, with a stepladder for a driveway and an altitude fit to boil water at eighty degrees Centigrade? It must take you forever to make breakfast. Twenty-minute eggs, and then they’re raw. I’m hungry. If that Danish basilisk hasn’t eaten everything in sight, I’d like to nibble on about eight sandwiches. Salami on whole wheat. Your flowers are gorgeous, child. So are you. You always were, of course. Pity you have brains. If you had no brains, you’d get married. A lovely view, honey, lovely. I like it here. Glad you bought it. Come here, you,” she said to Tiny.

He approached this small specimen of volubility with his head a little low and his tail down. She extended a hand and held it still to let him sniff it before she thumped him on the withers. He waved his unfashionable tail in acceptance and then went to join the laughing Alistair, who was coming down the steps.

“Mother, you’re marvelous. And you haven’t changed a bit.” She bent and kissed her. “What on earth made that awful noise?”

“Noise? Oh—the horn.” Mrs. Forsythe busily went about lifting the hood of the car. “I have a friend in the shoelace business. Wanted to stimulate trade for him. Fixed this up to make people jump out of their shoes. When they jump they break the laces. Leave their shoes in the street. Thousands of people walking about in their stocking feet. More people ought to, anyway. Good for the arches.” She pointed. There were four big air-driven horns mounted on and around the little motor. Over the mouth of each was a shutter, so arranged that it revolved about an axle set at right angles to the horn, so that the bell was opened and closed by four small DC motors. “That’s what gives it the warble. As for the beat-note, the four of them are tuned a sixteenth-tone apart. Pretty?”

“Pretty,” Alistair conceded with sincerity. “No—please don’t demonstrate it again, Mother! You almost wrenched poor Tiny’s ears off the first time.”

“Oh—did I?” Contritely, she went to the dog. “I didn’t mean to, honey-poodle, really I didn’t.” The honey-poodle looked up at her with somber brown eyes and thumped his tail on the ground. “I like him,” said Mrs. Forsythe decisively. She put out a fearless hand and pulled affectionately at the loose flesh of Tiny’s upper lip. “Will you look at those tusks! Great day in the morning, dog, reel in some of that tongue or you’ll turn yourself inside out. Why aren’t you married yet, chicken?”

“Why aren’t you?” Alistair countered.

Mrs. Forsythe stretched. “I’ve *been* married,” she said, and Alistair knew now her casualness was forced. “A married season with the likes of Dan Forsythe sticks with you.” Her voice softened. “Your daddy was all kinds of good people, baby.” She shook herself. “Let’s eat. I want to hear about Tiny. Your driblets and drablets of information about that dog are as tantalizing as Chapter Eleven of a movie serial. Who’s this Alec creature in St. Croix? Some kind of native—cannibal, or something? He sounds nice. I wonder if you know how nice *you* think he is? Good heavens, the girl’s blushing! I only know what I read in your letters, darling, and I never knew you to quote anyone by the paragraph before but that old scoundrel Nowland, and that was all about ductility and permeability and melting points. Metallurgy! A girl like you mucking about with molybs and durals instead of heartbeats and hope chests!”

“Mother, sweetheart, hasn’t it occurred to you at all that I don’t *want* to get married? Not yet, anyway.”

“Of course it has! That doesn’t alter the fact that a woman is only forty per cent a woman until someone loves her, and only eighty per cent a woman until she has children. As for you and your precious career I seem to remember something about a certain Marie Sklodowska who didn’t mind marrying a fellow called Curie, science or no science.”

“Darling,” said Alistair a little tiredly as they mounted the steps and went into the cool house, “once and for all, get this straight. The career, as such, doesn’t matter at all. The work does. I like it. I don’t see the sense in being married purely for the sake of being married.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, child, neither do I!” said Mrs. Forsythe quickly. Then, casting a critical eye over her daughter, she sighed, “But it’s such a waste!”

“What do you mean?”

Her mother shook her head. “If you don’t get it, it’s because there’s something wrong with your sense of values; in which case,

there's no point in arguing. I love your furniture. Now, for pity's sake feed me and tell me about this canine Carnera of yours."

Moving deftly about the kitchen while her mother perched like a bright-eyed bird on a utility ladder, Alistair told the story of her letters from Alec and Tiny's arrival.

"At first he was just a dog. A very wonderful dog, of course, and extremely well trained. We got along beautifully. There was nothing remarkable about him but his history, as far as I could see, and certainly no indication of…of anything. I mean, he might have responded to my name the way he did because the syllabic content pleased him."

"It should," said her mother complacently. "Dan and I spent weeks at a sound laboratory graphing a suitable name for you. Alistair Forsythe. Has a beat, you know. Keep that in mind when you change it."

"Mother!"

"All right, dear. Go on with the story."

"For all I knew, the whole thing was a crazy coincidence. Tiny didn't respond particularly to the sound of my name after he got here. He seemed to take a perfectly normal, doggy pleasure in sticking around, that was all.

"Then, one evening after he had been with me about a month, I found out he could read."

"Read!" Mrs. Forsythe toppled, clutched the edge of the sink, and righted herself.

"Well, practically that. I used to study a lot in the evenings, and Tiny used to stretch out in front of the fire with his nose between his paws and watch me. I was tickled by that. I even got the habit of talking to him while I studied. I mean, about the work. He always seemed to be paying very close attention, which, of course, was silly. And maybe it was my imagination, but the times he'd get up and nuzzle me always seemed to be the times when my mind was wandering or when I would quit working and go on to something else.

"This particular evening I was working on the permeability mathematics of certain of the rare-earth group. I put down my pencil and reached for my *Handbook of Chemistry and Physics* and found nothing but a big hole in the bookcase. The book wasn't on the desk, either. So I swung around to Tiny and said, just for something to say, 'Tiny, what have you done with my handbook?'

"He went *whuff!* in the most startled tone of voice, leaped to his feet, and went over to his bed. He turned up the mattress with his paw and scooped out the book. He picked it up in his jaws—I wonder what he would have done if he were a Scotty? That's a chunky piece of literature!—and brought it to me.

“I just didn’t know what to do. I took the book and riffled it. It was pretty well shoved around. Apparently he had been trying to leaf through it with those big splay feet of his. I put the book down and took him by the muzzle. I called him nine kinds of a rascal and asked him what he was looking for.” She paused, building a sandwich.

“Well?”

“Oh,” said Alistair, as if coming back from a far distance. “He didn’t say.”

There was a thoughtful silence. Finally, Mrs. Forsythe looked up with her odd birdlike glance and said, “You’re kidding. That dog isn’t shaggy enough.”

“You don’t believe me.” It wasn’t a question.

The older woman got up to put a hand on the girl’s shoulder. “Honey-lamb, your daddy used to say that the only things worth believing were things you learned from people you trusted. Of course I believe you. Thing is—do you believe you?”

“I’m not—sick, Mum, if that’s what you mean. Let me tell you the rest of it.”

“You mean there’s more?”

“Plenty more.” She put the stack of sandwiches on the sideboard where her mother could reach it. Mrs. Forsythe fell to with a will. “Tiny has been goading me to do research. A particular kind of research.”

“Hut hine uffefa?”

“Mother! I didn’t give you those sandwiches only to feed you. The idea was to soundproof you a bit, too, while I talked.”

“Hohay!” said her mother cheerfully.

“Well, Tiny won’t let me work on any other project but the one he’s interested in. Mum, I can’t talk if you’re going to gape like that! No… I can’t say he won’t let me do any work. But there’s a certain line of endeavor that he approves. If I do anything else, he snuffles around, joggles my elbow, grunts, whimpers, and generally carries on until I lose my temper and tell him to go away. Then he’ll walk over to the fireplace and flop down and sulk. Never takes his eyes off me. So, of course, I get all softhearted and repentant and apologize to him and get on with what he wants done.”

Mrs. Forsythe swallowed, coughed, gulped some milk, and exploded, “Wait a minute! You’re away too fast for me! What is it that he wants done? How do you know he wants it? Can he read, or can’t he? Make some sense, child!”

Alistair laughed richly. “Poor Mum! I don’t blame you, darling. No, I don’t think he can really read. He shows no interest at all in books or pictures. The episode with the handbook seemed to be an experiment that didn’t bring any results. But—he knows the difference

between my books, even books that are bound alike, even when I shift them around in the bookcase. Tiny!"

The Great Dane scrambled to his feet from the corner of the kitchen, his paws skidding on the waxed linoleum. "Get me Hoag's *Basic Radio,* old feller, will you?"

Tiny turned and padded out. They heard him going up the stairs. "I was afraid he wouldn't do it while you were here," she said. "He generally warns me not to say anything about his powers. He growls. He did that when Dr. Nowland dropped out for lunch one Saturday. I started to talk about Tiny and just couldn't. He acted disgracefully. First he growled and then he barked. It was the first time I've ever known him to bark in the house. Poor Dr. Nowland! He was scared half out of his wits!"

Tiny thudded down the stairs and entered the kitchen. "Give it to Mum," said Alistair. Tiny walked sedately over to the stool and stood before the astonished Mrs. Forsythe. She took the volume from his jaws.

"Basic Radio," she breathed.

"I asked him for that because I have a whole row of technical books up there, all from the same publisher, all the same color and about the same size," said Alistair calmly.

"But…but…how does he do it?"

Alistair shrugged. "I don't know! He doesn't read the titles. That I'm sure of. He can't read anything. I've tried to get him to do it a dozen different ways. I've lettered instructions on pieces of paper and shown them to him…you know… 'Go to the door' and 'Give me a kiss' and so on. Re just looks at them and wags his tail. But if I read them first—"

"You mean, read them aloud?"

"No. Oh…he'll do anything I ask him to, sure. But I don't have to say it. Just read it, and he turns and does it. That's the way he makes me study what he wants studied."

"Are you telling me that that behemoth can read your mind?"

"What do you think? Here—I'll show you. Give me the book."

Tiny's ears went up. "There's something in here about the electrical flux in supercooled copper that I don't quite remember. Let's see if Tiny's interested."

She sat on the kitchen table and began to leaf through the hook. Tiny came and sat in front of her, his tongue lolling out, his big brown eyes fixed on her face. There was silence as she turned pages, read a little, turned some more. And suddenly Tiny whimpered urgently.

"See what I mean, Mum? All right, Tiny. I'll read it over."

Silence again, while Alistair's long green eyes traveled over the page. All at once Tiny stood up and nuzzled her leg.

"Hm-m-m? The reference? Want me to go back?"

Tiny sat again, expectantly. "There's a reference here to a passage in the first section on basic electric theory that he wants," she explained. She looked up. "Mother! You read it to him!" She jumped off the table, handed the book over. "Here. Section 45. Tiny! Go listen to Mum. Go on!" and she shoved him toward Mrs. Forsythe, who said in an awed voice, "When I was a little girl, I used to read bedtime stories to my dolls. I thought I'd quit that kind of thing altogether, and now I'm reading technical literature to this…this canine catastrophe here. Shall I read aloud?"

"No—don't. See if he gets it."

But Mrs. Forsythe didn't get the chance. Before she had read two lines Tiny was frantic. He ran to Mrs. Forsythe and back to Alistair. He reared up like a frightened horse, rolled his eyes, and panted. He whimpered. He growled a little.

"For pity's sakes, what's wrong?"

"I guess he can't get it from you," said Alistair. "I've had the idea before that he's tuned to me in more ways than one and this clinches it. All right then. Give me back the—"

But before she could ask him, Tiny had bounded to Mrs. Forsythe, taken the book gently out of her hands, and carried it to his mistress. Alistair smiled at her paling mother, took the book, and read until Tiny suddenly seemed to lose interest. He went back to his station by the kitchen cabinet and lay down, yawning.

"That's that," said Alistair, closing the book. "In other words, class dismissed. Well, Mum?"

Mrs. Forsythe opened her mouth, closed it again, and shook her head. Alistair loosed a peal of laughter.

"Oh, Mum, Mum," she gurgled through her laughter. "History has been made. Mum, darling, you're speechless!"

"I am not," said Mrs. Forsythe gruffly. "I…I think well, what do you know! You're right! I *am!"*

When they had their breath back—yes, Mrs. Forsythe joined in, for Alistair's statement was indeed true—Alistair picked up the book and said, "Now look, Mum, it's almost time for my session with Tiny. Oh, yes; it's a regular thing and he certainly is leading me into some fascinating byways."

"Like what?"

"Like the old impossible problem of casting tungsten, for example. You know, there is a way to do it."

"You don't say! What do you cast it in—a play?"

Alistair wrinkled her straight nose. "Did you ever hear of pressure ice? Water compressed until it forms a solid at what is usually its boiling point?"

"I remember some such."

"Well, all you need is enough pressure, and a chamber that can take that kind of pressure, and a couple of details like a high-intensity field of umpteen megacycles phased with…I forget the figures; anyhow, that's the way to go about it."

"'If we had some eggs we could have some ham and eggs if we had some ham,'" quoted Mrs. Forsythe. "And besides, I seem to remember something about that pressure ice melting pretty much right now, like so," and she snapped her fingers. "How do you know your molded tungsten—that's what it would be, not cast at all—wouldn't change state the same way?"

"That's what I'm working on now," said Alistair calmly. "Come along, Tiny. Mum, you can find your way around all right, can't you? If you need anything, just sing out. This isn't a séance, you know."

"Isn't it, though?" muttered Mrs. Forsythe as her lithe daughter and the dog bounded up the stairs. She shook her head, went into the kitchen, drew a bucket of water, and carried it down to her car, which had cooled to a simmer. She was dashing careful handfuls of it onto the radiator, before beginning to pour, when her quick ear caught the scrunching of boots on the steep drive.

She looked up to see a young man trudging wearily in the midmorning heat. He wore an old sharkskin suit and carried his coat. In spite of his wilted appearance, his step was firm and his golden hair was crisp in the sunlight. He swung up to Mrs. Forsythe and gave her a grin, all deep blue eyes and good teeth. "Forsythe's?" he asked in a resonant baritone.

"That's right," said Mrs. Forsythe, finding that she had to turn her head from side to side to see both of his shoulders. And yet she and he could swap belts. "You must feel like the Blue Kangaroo here," she added, slapping her miniature mount on its broiling flank. "Boiled dry."

"You cahl de cyah de Blue Kangaroo?" he repeated, draping his coat over the door and mopping his forehead with what seemed, to Mrs. Forsythe's discerning eye, a pure linen handkerchief.

"I do," she replied, forcing herself not to comment on the young man's slight but strange accent. "It's strictly a dry-clutch job and acts like a castellated one. Let the pedal out, she races. Let it out three thirty-seconds of an inch more, and you're gone from there. Always stopping to walk back and pick up your head. Snaps right off, you know. Carry a bottle of collodion and a couple of splints to put your head back on. Starve to death without a head to eat With. What brings you here?"

In answer he held out a yellow envelope, looking solemnly at her head and neck, then at the car, his face quiet, his eyes crinkling with a

huge enjoyment.

Mrs. Forsythe glanced at the envelope. “Oh. Telegram. She’s inside. I’ll give it to her. Come on in and have a drink. It’s hotter than the hinges of Hail Columbia, Happy Land. Don’t go wiping your feet like that! By jeepers, that’s enough to give you an inferiority complex! Invite a man in, invite the dust on his feet, too. It’s good, honest dirt and we don’t run to white broadlooms here. Are you afraid of dogs?”

The young man laughed. “Dahgs talk to me, ma’am.”

She glanced at him sharply, opened her mouth to tell him he might just be taken at his word around here, then thought better of it. “Sit down,” she ordered. She bustled up a foaming glass of beer and set it beside him. “I’ll get her down to sign for the wire,” she said. The man half lowered the glass into which he had been jowls-deep, began to speak, found he was alone in the room, laughed suddenly and richly, wiped off the mustache of suds, and dove down for a new one.

Mrs. Forsythe grinned and shook her head as she heard the laughter, and went straight to Alistair’s study. “Alistair!”

“Stop pushing me about the ductility of tungsten, Tiny! You know better than that. Figures are figures, and facts are facts. I think I see what you’re trying to lead me to. All I can say is that if such a thing is possible, I never heard of any equipment that could handle it. Stick around a few years and I’ll hire you a nuclear power plant. Until then, I’m afraid that—”

“Alistair!”

“—there just isn’t…hm-m-m? Yes, Mother?”

“Telegram.”

“Oh. Who from?”

“I don’t know, being only one fortieth of one per cent as psychic as that doghouse Dunninger you have there. In other words, I didn’t open it.”

“Oh, Mum, you’re silly! Of course you could have—oh, well, let’s have it.”

“I haven’t got it. It’s downstairs with Discobolus Junior, who brought it. No one,” she said ecstatically, “has a right to be so tanned with hair that color.”

“What *are* you talking about?”

“Go on down and sign for the telegram and see for yourself. You will find the maiden’s dream with his golden head in a bucket of suds, all hot and sweaty from his noble efforts in attaining this peak without spikes or alpenstock, with nothing but his pure heart and Western Union to guide him.”

“This maiden’s dream happens to be tungsten treatment,” said Alistair with some irritation. She looked longingly at her work sheet, put down her pencil, and rose. “Stay here, Tiny. I’ll be right back as

soon as I have successfully resisted my conniving mother's latest scheme to drag my red hairing across some young buck's path to matrimony." She paused at the door. "Aren't you staying up here, Mum?"

"Get that hair away from your face," said her mother grimly. "I am not. I wouldn't miss this for the world. And don't pun in front of that young man. It's practically the only thing in the world I consider vulgar."

Alistair led the way down the stairs and through the corridor to the kitchen, with her mother crowding her heels, once fluffing out her daughter's blazing hair, once taking a swift tuck in the back of the girl's halter. They spilled through the door almost together. Alistair stopped and frankly stared.

For the young man had risen and, still with the traces of beer foam on his modeled lips, stood with his jaws stupidly open, his head a little back, his eyes partly closed as if against a bright light. And it seemed as if everyone in the room forgot to breathe for a moment.

"Well!" Mrs. Forsythe exploded after a moment. "Honey, you've made a conquest. Hey—you? Chin up! Chest out!"

"I beg your humble pardon," muttered the young man; and the phrase seemed more a colloquialism than an affectation.

Alistair, visibly pulling herself together, said, "Mother! Please!" and drifted forward to pick up the telegram that lay on the kitchen table. Her mother knew her well enough to realize that her hands and her eyes were steady only by a powerful effort. Whether the effort was in control of annoyance, embarrassment, or out-and-out biochemistry was a matter for later thought. At the moment she was enjoying it tremendously.

"Please wait," said Alistair coolly. "There may be an answer to this." The young man simply bobbed his head. He was still a little walleyed with the impact of seeing Alistair, as many a young man had been before. But there were the beginnings of his astonishing smile around his lips as he watched her rip the envelope open.

"Mother! Listen!

> "ARRIVED THIS MORNING AND HOPE I CAN CATCH YOU AT HOME. OLD DEBBIL KILLED IN ACCIDENT BUT FOUND HIS MEMORY BEFORE HE DIED. HAVE INFORMATION WHICH MAY CLEAR UP MYSTERY—OR DEEPEN IT. HOPE I CAN SEE YOU FOR I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO THINK.
>
> *ALEC."*

"How old is this tropical savage?" asked Mrs. Forsythe.

“He’s not a savage and I don’t know how old he is and I can’t see what that has to do with it. I think he’s about my age or a little older.” She looked up, and her eyes were shining.

“Deadly rival,” said Mrs. Forsythe to the messenger consolingly. “Rotten timing here, somewhere.”

“I—” said the young man.

“Mother, we’ve got to fix something to eat. Do you suppose he’ll be able to stay over? Where’s my green dress with the… oh, you wouldn’t know. It’s new.”

“Then the letters weren’t all about the dog,” said Mrs. Forsythe, with a Cheshire grin.

“Mum, you’re impossible! This is… is important. Alec is… is…”

Her mother nodded. “Important. That’s all I was pointing out.”

The young man said, “I—”

Alistair turned to him. “I do hope you don’t think we’re totally mad. I’m sorry you had such a climb.” She went to the sideboard and took a quarter out of a sugar bowl. He took it gravely.

“Thank you, ma’am. If you don’t mm’, I’ll keep this piece of silver for the rest o’ my everlahstin’.”

“You’re wel—*What?”*

The young man seemed to get even taller. “I greatly appreciate your hospitality, Mrs. Forsythe. I have you at a disadvantage, ma’am, and one I shall correct.” He put a crooked forefinger between his lips and blew out an incredible blast of sound.

“Tiny!” he roared. “Here to me, dahg, an’ mek me known!”

There was a roar from upstairs, and Tiny came tumbling down, scrabbling wildly as he took the turn at the foot of the stairs and hurtled over the slick flooring to crash joyfully into the young man.

“Ah, you beast,” crooned the man, cuffing the dog happily. His accent thickened. “You thrive yourself here wid de lady-dem, you gray-yut styoupid harse. You glad me, mon, you glad me.” He grinned at the two astonished women. “Forgive me,” he said as he pummeled Tiny, pulled his ears, shoved him away, and caught him by the jaws. “For true, I couldn’t get in the first word with Mrs. Forsythe, and after I couldn’t help meself. Alec my name is, and the telegram I took from the true messenger, finding him sighing and sweating at the sight of the hill there.”

Alistair covered her face with her hands and said, “Oooh.” Mrs. Forsythe whooped with laughter. She found her voice and demanded, “Young man, what is your last name?”

“Sundersen, ma’am.”

“Mother! Why did you ask him that?”

“For reasons of euphony,” said Mrs. Forsythe with a twinkle. “Alexander Sundersen. Very good. Alistair—”

"Stop! Mum, don't you dare—"

"I was going to say, Alistair, if you and our guest will excuse me, I'll have to get back to my knitting." She went to the door.

Alistair threw an appalled look at Alec and cried, "Mother! What are you knitting?"

"My brows, darling. See you later." Mrs. Forsythe chuckled and went out.

It took almost a week for Alec to get caught up with the latest developments in Tiny, for he got the story in the most meticulous detail. There never seemed to be enough time to get in an explanation or an anecdote, so swiftly did the time fly when he and Alistair were together. Some of these days he went into the city with Alistair in the morning and spent the day buying tools and equipment for his estate. New York was a wonder city to him—he had been there only once before—and Alistair found herself getting quite possessive about the place, showing it off like the contents of a jewel box. And then Alec stayed at the house a couple of days. He endeared himself forever to Mrs. Forsythe by removing, cleaning, and refacing the clutch on the Blue Kangaroo, simplifying the controls on the gas refrigerator so it could be defrosted without a major operation, and putting a building jack under the corner of the porch that threatened to sag.

And the sessions with Tiny were resumed and intensified. At first, he seemed a little uneasy when Alec joined one of them, but within half an hour he relaxed. Thereafter, more and more he would interrupt Alistair to turn to Alec. Although he apparently could not understand Alec's thoughts at all, he seemed to comprehend perfectly when Alec spoke to Alistair. And within a few days she learned to accept these interruptions, for they speeded up the research they were doing. Alec was almost totally ignorant of the advanced theory with which Alistair worked, but his mind was clear, quick, and very direct. He was no theorist, and that was good. He was one of those rare grease-monkey geniuses, with a grasp that amounted to intuition concerning the laws of cause and effect. Tiny's reaction to this seemed to be approved. At any rate, the occasions when Alistair lost the track of what Tiny was after happened less and less frequently. Alec instinctively knew just how far to go back, and then how to spot the turning at which they had gone astray. And bit by bit, they began to identify what it was that Tiny was after. As to why—and how—he was after it, Alec's experience with old Debbil seemed a clue. It certainly was sufficient to keep Alec plugging away at a possible solution to the strange animal's stranger need.

"It was down at the sugar mill," he told Alistair, after he had become fully acquainted with the incredible dog's action and they were trying to determine the why and the how. "He called me over to

the chute where cane is loaded into the conveyors.

"'Bahss,' he told me 'dat t'ing dere, it not safe, sah.' And he pointed through the guard over the bull gears that drove the conveyor. 'Great big everlahstin' teeth it has, Miss Alistair, a full ten inches long, and it whirlin' to the drive pinion. It's old, but strong for good. Debbil, what he saw was a bit o' play on the pinion shaf'.'

"'Now, you're an old fool,' I told him.

"'No, Bahss,' he says. 'Look now, sah, de t'ing wit' de teet'—dem, it not safe, sah. I mek you see,' and before I could move meself or let a thought trickle, he *opens* the guard up and thrus' his han' inside! Bull gear, it run right up his arm and nip it off, neat as ever, at the shoulder. I humbly beg your pardon, Miss Alistair."

"G-go on," said Alistair, through her handkerchief.

"Well, sir, old Debbil was an idiot for true, and he only died the way he lived, rest him. He was old and he was all eaten out with malaria and elephantiasis and the like, that not even Dr. Thetford could save him. But a strange thing happened. As he lay dyin', with the entire village gathered roun' the door whisperin' plans for the wake, he sent to tell me come quickly. Down I run, and for the smile on his face I glad him when I cross the doorstep."

As Alec spoke, he was back in the Spanish-wall hut, with the air close under the palm-thatch roof and the glare of the pressure lantern set on the tiny window ledge to give the old man light to die by. Alec's accent deepened. "'How you feel, mon?' I ahsk him. 'Bahss, I'm a dead man now, but I got a light in mah hey-yud.'

"'Tell me, then, Debbil.'

"'Bahss, de folk-dem say, ol' Debbil, him cyahn't remembah de taste of a mango as he t'row away de skin. Him cyahn't remembah his own house do he stay away t'ree day.'

"'Loose talk, Debbil.'

"'True talk, Bahss. Foh de Lahd give me a leaky pot fo' hol' ma brains. But Bahss, I do recall one t'ing now, bright an' clear, and you must know. Bahss, de day I go up the wahtah line, I see a great jumbee in de stones of de Gov'nor Palace dere.'"

"What's a jumbee?" asked Mrs. Forsythe.

"A ghost, ma'am. The Crucians carry a crawlin' heap of superstitions. Tiny! What eats you, mon?"

Tiny growled again. Alec and Alistair exchanged a look. "He doesn't want you to go on."

"Listen carefully. I want him to get this. I am his friend. I want to help you help him. I realize that he wants as few people as possible to find out about this thing. I will say nothing to anybody unless and until I have his permission.

"Well, Tiny?"

The dog stood restlessly, swinging his great head from Alistair to Alec. Finally he made a sound like an audible shrug, then turned to Mrs. Forsythe.

"Mother's part of me," said Alistair firmly. "That's the way it's got to be. No alternative." She leaned forward. "You can't talk to us. You can only indicate what you want said and done. I think Alec's story will help us to understand what you want and help you to get it more quickly. Understand?"

Tiny gazed at her for a long moment, said *"Whuff!"* and lay down with his nose between his paws and his eyes fixed on Alec.

"I think that's the green light," said Mrs. Forsythe, "and I might add that most of it was due to my daughter's conviction that you're a wonderful fellow."

"Mother!"

"Well, pare me down and call me Spud! They're both blushing!" said Mrs. Forsythe blatantly.

"Go on, Alec," choked Alistair.

"Thank you. Old Debbil told me a fine tale of the things he had seen at the ruins. A great beast, mind you, with no shape at all, and a face ugly to drive you mad. And about the beast was what he called a 'feelin' good.' He said it was a miracle, but he feared nothing. 'Wet it was, Bahss, like a slug, an' de eye it have is whirlin' an' shakin', an' I standin' dar feelin' like a bride at de altar step an' no fear in me.' Well, I thought the old man's mind was wandering, for I knew he was touched. But the story he told was *that* clear, and never a simple second did he stop to think. Out it all came like a true thing.

"He said that Tiny walked to the beast and that it curved over him like an ocean wave. It closed over the dog, and Debbil was rooted there the livelong day, still without fear, and feelin' no smallest desire to move. He had no surprise at all, even at the thing he saw restin' in the thicket among the old stones.

"He said it was a submarine, a mighty one as great as the estate house and with no break nor mar in its surface but for the glass part let in where the mouth is on a shark.

"And then when the sun began to dip, the beast gave a shudderin' heave and rolled back, and out walked Tiny. He stepped up to Debbil and stood. Then the beast begun to quiver and shake, and Debbil said the air aroun' him heavied with the work the monster was doing, tryin' to talk. A cloud formed in his brain, and a voice swept over him. 'Not a livin' word, Bahss, nor a sound at all. But it said to forget. It said to leave dis place and forget, sah.' And the last thing old Debbil saw as he turned away was the beast slumping down, seeming all but dead from the work it had done to speak at all. 'An' de cloud leave in mah hey-yud, Bahss, f'om dat time onward. I'm a dead man now,

Bahss, but de cloud gone and Debbil know de story.'" Alec leaned back and looked at his hands. "That was all. This must have happened about fifteen months pahst, just before Tiny began to show his strange stripe." He drew a deep breath and looked up. "Maybe I'm gullible. But I knew the old man too well. He never in this life could invent such a tale. I troubled myself to go up to the Governor's Palace after the buryin'. I might have been mistaken, but something big had lain in the deepest thicket, for it was crushed into a great hollow place near a hundred foot long. Well, there you are. For what it's worth, you have the story of a superstitious an' illiterate old man, at the point of death by violence and many years sick to boot."

There was a long silence, and at last Alistair threw her lucent hair back and said, "It isn't Tiny at all. It's a…a thing outside Tiny." She looked at the dog, her eyes wide. "And I don't even mind."

"Neither did Debbil, when he saw it," said Alec gravely.

Mrs. Forsythe snapped, "What are we sitting gawking at each other for? Don't answer; I'll tell you. All of us can think up a story to fit the facts, and we're all too self-conscious to come out with it. Any story that fit those facts would really be a killer."

"Well said." Alec grinned. "Would you like to tell us your idea?"

"Silly boy," muttered Alistair.

"Don't be impertinent, child. Of course I'd like to tell you, Alec. I think that the good Lord, in His infinite wisdom, has decided that it was about time for Alistair to come to her senses, and, knowing that it would take a quasi-scientific miracle to do it, dreamed up this—"

"Some day," said Alistair icily, "I'm going to pry you loose from your verbosity and your sense of humor in one fell swoop."

Mrs. Forsythe grinned. "There is a time for jocularity, kidlet, and this is it. I hate solemn people solemnly sitting around being awed by things. What do you make of all this, Alec?"

Alec pulled his ear and said, "I vote we leave it up to Tiny. It's his show. Let's get on with the work and just keep in mind what we already know."

And to their astonishment, Tiny stumped over to Alec and licked his hand.

* * * *

The blowoff came six weeks after Alec's arrival. (Oh, yes! He stayed six weeks, and longer! It took some fiendish cogitation for him to think of enough legitimate estate business that had to be done in New York to keep him that long; but after that he was so much one of

the family that he needed no excuse.) He had devised a code system for Tiny, so that Tiny could add something to their conversation. His point: “Here he sits, ma’am, like a fly on the wall, seeing everything and hearing everything and saying not a word. Picture it for yourself, and you in such a position, full entranced as you are with the talk you hear.” And for Mrs. Forsythe particularly, the mental picture was altogether too vivid! It was so well presented that Tiny’s research went by the board for four days while they devised the code. They had to give up the idea of a glove with a pencil pocket in it, with which Tiny might write a little, or any similar device. 1 was simply not deft enough for such meticulous work; and besides, he showed absolutely no signs of understanding any written or printed symbolism. Unless, of course, Alistair thought about it.

Alec’s plan was simple. He cut some wooden forms—a disk, a square, a triangle to begin with. The disk signified “yes” or any other affirmation, depending on the context. The square was “no” or any negation; and the triangle indicated a question or a change in subject. The amount of information Tiny was able to impart by moving from one to another of these forms was astonishing. Once a subject for discussion was established, Tiny would take a stand between the disk and the square, so that all he had to do was to swing his head to one side or the other to indicate a “yes” or a “no.” No longer were there those exasperating sessions in which the track of his research was lost while they back-trailed to discover where they had gone astray. The conversations ran like this:

“Tiny, I have a question. Hope you won’t think it too personal. May I ask it?” That was Alec, always infinitely polite to dogs. He had always recognized their innate dignity.

Yes, the answer would come, as Tiny swung his head over the disk.

“Are we right in assuming that you, the dog, are not communicating with us: that you are the medium?”

Tiny went to the triangle. “You want to change the subject?”

Tiny hesitated, then went to the square. *No.*

Alistair said, “He obviously wants something from us before he will discuss the question. Right, Tiny?”

Yes.

Mrs. Forsythe said, “He’s had his dinner, and he doesn’t smoke. I think he wants us to assure him that we’ll keep his secret.”

Yes.

“Good. Alec, you’re wonderful,” said Alistair. “Mother, stop beaming! I only meant—”

“Leave it at that, child! Any qualification will spoil it for the man!”

"Thank you, ma'am," said Alec gravely, with that deep twinkle of amusement around his eyes. Then he turned back to Tiny. "Well, what about it, sah? Are you a superdog?"

No.

"Who…no, he can't answer that. Let's go back a bit. Was old Debbil's story true?"

Yes.

"Ah." They exchanged glances. "Where is this—monster? Still in St. Croix?"

No.

"Here?"

Yes.

"You mean here, in this room or in the house?"

No.

"Nearby, though?"

Yes.

"How can we find out just where, without mentioning the countryside item by item?" asked Alistair.

"I know," said Mrs. Forsythe. "Alec, according to Debbil, that 'submarine' thing was pretty big, wasn't it?"

"That it was, ma'am."

"Good. Tiny, does he…it…have the ship here, too?"

Yes.

Mrs. Forsythe spread her hands. "That's it, then. There's only one place around here where you could hide such an object." She nodded her head at the west wall of the house.

"The river!" cried Alistair. "That right, Tiny?"

Yes. And Tiny went immediately to the triangle.

"Wait!" said Alec. "Tiny, beggin' your pardon, but there's one more question. Shortly after you took passage to New York, there was a business with compasses, where they all pointed to the west. Was that the ship?"

Yes.

"In the water?"

No.

"Why," said Alistair, "this is pure science fiction! Alec, do you ever get science fiction in the tropics?"

"Ah, Miss Alistair, not often enough, for true. But well I know it. The spaceships are Old Mother Goose to me. But there's a difference here. For in all the stories I've read, when a beast comes here from space, it's to kill and conquer; and yet—and I don't know why—I know that this one wants nothing of the sort. More, he's out to do us good."

"I feel the same way," said Mrs. Forsythe thoughtfully. "It's sort of

a protective cloud which seems to surround us. Does that make sense to you, Alistair?"

"I know it from 'way back," said Alistair with conviction. She looked at the dog thoughtfully. "I wonder why he…it…won't show itself. And why it can communicate only through me. And why me?"

"I'd say, Miss Alistair, that you were chosen because of your metallurgy. As to why we never see the beast—Well, it knows best. Its reason must be a good one."

* * * *

Day after day, and bit by bit, they got and gave information. Many things remained mysteries; but, strangely, there seemed no real need to question Tiny too closely. The atmosphere of confidence, of good will that surrounded them made questions seem not only unnecessary but downright rude.

And day by day, and little by little, a drawing began to take shape under Alec's skilled hands. It was a casting, with a simple enough external contour, but inside it contained a series of baffles and a chamber. It was designed, apparently, to support and house a carballoy shaft. There were no openings into the central chamber except those taken by the shaft. The shaft turned; *something* within the chamber apparently drove it. There was plenty of discussion about it.

"Why the baffles?" moaned Alistair, palming all the neatness out of her flaming hair. "Why carballoy? And in the name of Nemo, why tungsten?"

Alec stared at the drawing for a long moment, then suddenly clapped a hand to his head. "Tiny! Is there radiation inside that housing? I mean, hard stuff?"

Yes.

"There you are, then," said Alec. "Tungsten to shield the radiation. A casting for uniformity. The baffles to make a meander out of the shaft openings—see, the shaft has plates turned on it to fit between the baffles."

"And nowhere for anything to go in, nowhere for anything to come out—except the shaft, of course and besides, you can't cast tungsten that way! Maybe Tiny's monster can, but we can't. Maybe with the right flux and with enough power—but that's silly. Tungsten won't cast."

"And we cahn't build a spaceship. There must be a way!"

"Not with today's facilities, and not with tungsten," said Alistair. "Tiny's ordering it from us the way we would order a wedding cake at the corner bakery."

"What made you say 'wedding cake'?"

"You, too, Alec? Don't I get enough of that from Mother?" But she smiled all the same. "But about the casting—it seems to me that our mysterious friend is in the position of a radio fiend who understands every part of his set, how it's made, how and why it works. Then a tube blows, and he finds he can't buy one. He has to make one if he gets one at all. Apparently old Debbil's beast is in that kind of spot. What about it, Tiny? Is your friend short a part which he understands but has never built before?"

Yes.

"And he needs it to get away from Earth?"

Yes.

Alec asked, "What's the trouble? Can't get escape velocity?"

Tiny hesitated, then went to the triangle. "Either he doesn't want to talk about it or the question doesn't quite fit the situation," said Alistair. "It doesn't matter. Our main problem is the casting. It just can't be done. Not by anyone

on this planet, as far as I know; and I think I know. It has to be tungsten, Tiny?"

Yes.

"Tungsten, for what?" asked Alec. "Radiation shield?"

Yes.

He turned to Alistair. "Isn't there something just as good?"

She mused, staring at his drawing. "Yes, several things," she said thoughtfully. Tiny watched her, motionless. He seemed to slump as she shrugged dispiritedly and said, "But not anything with walls as thin as that. A yard or so of lead might do it, and have something like the mechanical strength he seems to want, but it would obviously be too big. Beryllium—" At the word, Tiny went and stood right on top of the square—a most emphatic no.

"How about an alloy?" Alec asked.

"Well, Tiny?"

Tiny went to the triangle. Alistair nodded. "You don't know. I can't think of one. I'll take it up with Dr. Nowland. Maybe—"

The following day Alec stayed home and spent the day arguing cheerfully with Mrs. Forsythe and building a grape arbor. It was a radiant Alistair who came home that evening. "Got it! Got it!" she caroled as she danced in. "Alec! Tiny—come on!"

They flew upstairs to the study. Without removing the green "beanie" with the orange feather that so nearly matched her hair, Alistair hauled out four reference books and began talking animatedly. "Auric molybdenum, Tiny! What about that? Gold and molyb III should do it! Listen!" And she launched forth into a spatter of absorption data, Greek-letter formulas, and strength-of-materials

comparisons that quite made Alec's head swim. He sat watching her without listening. Increasingly, this was his greatest pleasure.

When Alistair was quite through, Tiny walked away from her and lay down, gazing off into space.

"Well, strike me!" said Alec. "Look yonder, Miss Alistair. The very first time I ever saw him thinking something over."

"Sh-h! Don't disturb him, then. If that is the answer, and if he never thought of it before, it will take some figuring out. There's no knowing what fantastic kind of science he's comparing it with."

"I see the point. Like…well, suppose we crashed a plane in the Brazilian jungle and needed a new hydraulic cylinder on the landing gear. Now, then, one of the natives shows us ironwood, and it's up to us to figure out if we can make it serve."

"That's about it," breathed Alistair. "I—" She was interrupted by Tiny, who suddenly leaped up and ran to her, kissing her hands, committing the forbidding enormity of putting his paws on her shoulders, running back to the wooden forms and nudging the disk, the *yes* symbol. His tail was going like a metronome without its pendulum. Mrs. Forsythe came in in the midst of all this rowdiness and demanded:

"What goes on? Who made a dervish out of Tiny? What have you been feeding him? Don't tell me. Let me…you don't mean you've solved his problem for him? What are you going to do—buy him a pogo stick?"

"Oh, Mum! We've got it! An alloy of molybdenum and gold! I can get it alloyed and cast in no time!"

"Good, honey—good. You going to cast the whole thing?" She pointed to the drawing.

"Why, yes."

"Humph!"

"Mother! Why, if I may ask, do you 'humph' in that tone of voice?"

"You may ask. Chicken, who's going to pay for it?"

"Why, that will…I—oh. *Oh!"* she said, aghast, and ran to the drawing. Alec came and looked over her shoulder. She figured in the corner of the drawing, oh-ed once again, and sat down weakly.

"How much?" asked Alec.

"I'll get an estimate in the morning," she said faintly. "I know plenty of people. I can get it at cost—maybe." She looked at Tiny despairingly. He came and laid his head against her knee, and she pulled at his ears. "I won't let you down, darling," she whispered.

She got the estimate the next day. It was a little over thirteen thousand dollars.

Alistair and Alec stared blankly at each other and then at the dog.

“Maybe you can tell us where we can raise that much money?” said Alistair, as if she expected Tiny to whip out a wallet.

Tiny whimpered, licked Alistair’s hand, looked at Alec, and then lay down.

“Now what?” mused Alec.

“Now we go and fix something to eat,” said Mrs. Forsythe, moving toward the door. The others were about to follow, when Tiny leaped to his feet and ran in front of them. He stood in the doorway and whimpered. When they came closer, he barked.

“Sh-h! What is it, Tiny? Want us to stay here a while?”

“Say! Who’s the boss around here?” Mrs. Forsythe wanted to know.

“He is,” said Alec, and he knew he was speaking for all of them. They sat down, Mrs. Forsythe on the studio couch, Alistair at her desk, Alec at the drawing table. But Tiny seemed not to approve of the arrangement. He became vastly excited, running to Alec, nudging him hard, dashing to Alistair, taking her wrist very gently in his jaws and pulling gently toward Alec.

“What is it, fellow?”

“Seems like matchmaking to me,” remarked Mrs. Forsythe.

“Nonsense, Mum!” said Alistair, coloring. “He wants Alec and me to change places, that’s all.”

Alec said, “Oh!” and went to sit beside Mrs. Forsythe. Alistair sat at the drawing table. Tiny put a paw up on it, poked at the large tablet of paper. Alistair looked at him curiously, then tore off the top sheet. Tiny nudged a pencil with his nose.

Then they waited. Somehow, no one wanted to speak. Perhaps no one could, but there seemed to be no reason to try. And gradually a tension built up in the room. Tiny stood stiff and rapt in the center of the room. His eyes glazed, and when he finally keeled over limply, no one went to him.

Alistair picked up the pencil slowly. Watching her hand, Alec was reminded of the movement of the pointer on a ouija board. The pencil traveled steadily, in small surges, to the very top of the paper and hung there. Alistair’s face was quite blank.

After that no one could say what happened, exactly. It was as if their eyes had done what their voices had done. They could see, but they did not care to. And Alistair’s pencil began to move. Something, somewhere, was directing her mind—not her hand. Faster and faster her pencil flew, and it wrote what was later to be known as the Forsythe Formulas.

There was no sign then, of course, of the furor that they would cause, of the millions of words of conjecture that were written when it was discovered that the girl who wrote them could not possibly have

had the mathematical background to have written them. They were understood by no one at first, and by very few people ever. Alistair certainly did not know what they meant.

An editorial in a popular magazine came startlingly close to the true nature of the formulas when it said: “The Forsythe Formulas, which describe what the Sunday supplements call the ‘Something-for-Nothing Clutch,’ and the drawing that accompanies them, signify little to the layman. As far as can be determined, the formulas are the description and working principles of a device. It appears to be a power plant of sorts, and if it is ever understood, atomic power will go the way of gas lights.

“A sphere of energy is enclosed in a shell made of neutron-absorbing material. This sphere has inner and outer ‘layers.’ A shaft passes through the sphere. Apparently a magnetic field must be rotated about the outer casing of the device. The sphere of energy aligns itself with this field. The inner sphere rotates with the outer one and has the ability to turn the shaft. Unless the mathematics used are disproved—and no one seems to have come anywhere near doing that, unorthodox as they are—the aligning effect between the rotating field and the two concentric spheres, as well as the shaft, is quite independent of any load. In other words, if the original magnetic field rotates at 3,000 r.p.m., the shaft will rotate at 3000 r.p.m., even if there is only a sixteenth horsepower turning the field while there is a 10,000 braking stress on the shaft.

“Ridiculous? Perhaps. And perhaps it is no more so than the apparent impossibility of 15 watts of energy pouring into the antenna of a radio station, and nothing coming down. The key to the whole problem is in the nature of those self-contained spheres of force inside the shell. Their power is apparently inherent, and consists of an ability to align, just as the useful property of steam is its faculty to expand. If, as is suggested by Reinhardt in his ‘Usage of the Symbol B in the Forsythe Formulas,’ these spheres are nothing but stable concentrations of pure binding energy, we have here a source of power beyond the wildest dreams of mankind. And whether or not we succeed in building such devices, it cannot be denied that whatever their mysterious source, the Forsythe Formulas are an epochal gift to several sciences, including, if you like, the art of philosophy.”

* * * *

After it was over, and the formulas written, the terrible tension lifted. The three humans sat in their happy coma, and the dog lay senseless on the rug. Mrs. Forsythe was the first to move, standing up

abruptly. “Well!” she said.

It seemed to break a spell. Everything was quite normal. No hangovers, no sense of strangeness, no fear. They stood looking wonderingly at the mass of minute figures.

“I don’t know,” murmured Alistair, and the phrase covered a world of meaning. Then, “Alec—that casting. We’ve got to get it done. We’ve just *got* to, no matter what it costs us!”

“I’d like to,” said Alec. “Why do we have to?”

She waved toward the drawing table. “We’ve been given that.”

“You don’t say!” said Mrs. Forsythe. “And what is that?”

Alistair put her hand to her head, and a strange, unfocused look came into her eyes. That look was the only part of the whole affair that ever really bothered Alec. It was a place she had gone to, a little bit; and he knew that no matter whatever happened, he would never be able to go there with her.

She said, “He’s been…talking to me, you know. You do know that, don’t you? I’m not guessing, Alec—Mum.”

“I believe you, chicken,” her mother said softly. “What are you trying to say?”

“I got it in concepts. It isn’t a thing you can repeat, really. But the idea is that he couldn’t give us any thing. His ship is completely functional, and there isn’t anything he can exchange for what he wants us to do. But he has given us something of great value—” Her voice trailed off; she seemed to listen to something for a moment. “Of value in several ways. A new science, a new approach to attack the science. New tools, new mathematics.”

“But what is it? What can it do? And how is it going to help us pay for the casting?” asked Mrs. Forsythe.

“It can’t, immediately,” said Alistair decisively. “It’s too big. We don’t even know what it is. Why are you arguing? Can’t you understand that he can’t give us any gadgetry? That we haven’t his techniques, materials, and tools, and so we couldn’t make any actual machine he suggested? He’s done the only thing he can; he’s given us a new science, and tools to take it apart.”

“That I know,” said Alec gravely. “Well, indeed. I felt that. And I…trust him. Do you, ma’am?”

“Yes, of course. I think he’s—people. I think he has a sense of humor and a sense of justice,” said Mrs. Forsythe firmly. “Let’s get our heads together. We ought to be able to scrape it up some way. And why shouldn’t we? Haven’t we three got something to talk about for the rest of our lives?”

And their heads went together.

* * * *

This is the letter that arrived two months later in St. Croix.

Honey-lamb,

Hold on to your seat. It's all over.

The casting arrived. I missed you more than ever, but when you have to go—and you know I'm glad you went! Anyway, I did as you indicated, through Tiny, before you left. The men who rented me the boat and ran it for me thought I was crazy, and said so. Do you know that once we were out on the river with the casting, and Tiny started whuffing and whimpering to tell me we were on the right spot, and I told the men to tip the casting over the side, they had the colossal nerve to insist on opening the crate? Got quite nasty about it. Didn't want to be a party to any dirty work. It was against my principles, but I let them, just to expedite matters. They were certain there was a body in the box! When they saw what it was, I was going to bend my umbrelly over their silly heads, but they looked so funny! I couldn't do a thing but roar with laughter. That was when the man said I was crazy.

Anyhow, over the side it went, into the river. Made a lovely splash. And about a minute later I got the loveliest feeling—I wish I could describe it to you. I was sort of overwhelmed by a feeling of utter satisfaction, and gratitude, and…oh, I don't know. I just felt good, all over. I looked at Tiny, and he was trembling. I think he felt it, too. I'd call it a thank you, on a grand psychic scale. I think you can rest assured that Tiny's monster got what it wanted.

But that wasn't the end of it. I paid off the boatmen and started up the bank. Something made me stop, and wait, and then go back to the water's edge.

It was early evening, and very still. I was under some sort of compulsion—not an unpleasant thing, but an unbreakable one. I sat down on the river wall and watched the water. There was no one around—the boat had left—except one of those snazzy Sunlounge cruisers anchored a few yards out. I remember how still it was, because there was a little girl playing on the deck of the yacht, and I could hear her footsteps as she ran about.

Suddenly I noticed something in the water. I suppose I should have been frightened, but somehow I wasn't at all. Whatever the thing was, it was big and gray and slimy and quite shapeless. And somehow, it seemed to be the source of this aura of well-being and protectiveness that I felt. It was staring at me. I knew it was before I saw that it had an eye—a big one, with something whirling inside of it…I don't know. I wish I could write. I wish I had the power to tell you what it was like. I know that it was, by human standards, infinitely revolting. If this was Tiny's monster, I could understand its being sensitive to the revulsion it might cause. And wrongly, for I felt

to the core that the creature was good.

It winked at me. I don't mean blinked. It winked. And then everything happened at once.

The creature was gone, and in seconds there was a disturbance in the water by the yacht. Something gray and wet reached up out of the river, and I saw it was going for that little girl. Only a tyke—about three, she was. Red hair just like yours. And it thumped that child in the small of the back just enough to knock her over—into the river.

And can you believe it? I just sat there watching and said never a word! It didn't seem right to me that that baby could be struggling in the water. *But it didn't seem wrong, either!*

Well, before I could get my wits together, Tiny was off the wall like a hairy bullet and streaking through the water. I have often wondered why his feet are so big; I never will again. The hound is built like the lower half of a paddle wheel! In two shakes he had the baby by the scruff of the neck and was bringing her back to me. No one had seen that child get pushed, Alistair! No one but me. But there was a man on the yacht who must have seen her fall. He was all over the deck, roaring orders and getting in the way of things, and by the time he had his wherry in the water, Tiny had reached me with the little girl. She wasn't frightened, either—she thought it was a grand joke! Wonderful youngster.

So the man came ashore, all gratitude and tears, and wanted to goldplate Tiny or something. Then he saw me. "That your dog?" I said it was my daughter's. She was in St. Croix on her honeymoon. Before I could stop him, he had a checkbook out and was scratching away at it. He said he knew my kind. Said he knew I'd never accept a thing for myself, but wouldn't refuse something for my daughter. I enclose the check. Why he picked a sum like thirteen thousand, I'll never know. Anyhow, I know it'll be a help to you. Since the money really comes from Tiny's monster, I suppose I can confess that getting Alec to put up the money—even though he would have to clean out his savings and mortgage his estate—would be a good idea if he were one of the family, because then he'd have you to help him make it all back again—that was all my idea. Sometimes, though, watching you, I wonder if I really had to work so all-fired hard to get you nice people married to each other.

Well, I imagine that closes the business of Tiny's monster. There are a lot of things we'll probably never know. I can guess some things, though. It could communicate with a dog but not with a human, unless it half killed itself trying. Apparently a dog is telepathic with humans to a degree, though it probably doesn't understand a lot of what it gets. I don't speak French, but I could probably transcribe French phonetically well enough so a Frenchman could read it. Tiny

was transcribing that way. The monster could "send" through him and control him completely. It no doubt indoctrinated the dog—if I can use the term—the day old Debbil took him up the waterline. And when the monster caught, through Tiny, the mental picture of you when Or. Schwellenbach mentioned you, it went to work through the dog to get you working on its problem. Mental pictures—that's probably what the monster used. That's how Tiny could tell one book from another without being able to read. You visualize everything you think about. What do you think? *I* think that mine's as good a guess as any.

You might be amused to learn that last night all the compasses in this neighborhood pointed west for a couple of hours! 'Bye, now, chillun. Keep on being happy.

Love and love, and a kiss for Alec,

Mum.

P.S. Is St. Croix really a nice place to honeymoon? Jack—he's the fellow who signed the check—is getting very sentimental. He's very like your father. A widower, and—Oh, I don't know. Says fate, or something, brought us together. Said he hadn't planned to take a trip upriver with the baby, but something drove him to it. He can't imagine why he anchored just there. Seemed a good idea at the time. Maybe it was fate. He is very sweet. I wish I could forget that wink I saw in the water.

BEYOND LIES THE WUB, by Philip K. Dick

They had almost finished with the loading. Outside stood the Optus, his arms folded, his face sunk in gloom. Captain Franco walked leisurely down the gangplank, grinning.

"What's the matter?" he said. "You're getting paid for all this."

The Optus said nothing. He turned away, collecting his robes. The Captain put his boot on the hem of the robe.

"Just a minute. Don't go off. I'm not finished."

"Oh?" The Optus turned with dignity. "I am going back to the village." He looked toward the animals and birds being driven up the gangplank into the spaceship. "I must organize new hunts."

Franco lit a cigarette. "Why not? You people can go out into the veldt and track it all down again. But when we run out halfway between Mars and Earth—"

The Optus went off, wordless. Franco joined the first mate at the bottom of the gangplank.

"How's it coming?" he said. He looked at his watch. "We got a good bargain here."

The mate glanced at him sourly. "How do you explain that?"

"What's the matter with you? We need it more than they do."

"I'll see you later, Captain." The mate threaded his way up the plank, between the long-legged Martian go-birds, into the ship. Franco watched him disappear. He was just starting up after him, up the plank toward the port, when he saw *it*.

"My God!" He stood staring, his hands on his hips. Peterson was walking along the path, his face red, leading *it* by a string.

"I'm sorry, Captain," he said, tugging at the string. Franco walked toward him.

"What is it?"

The wub stood sagging, its great body settling slowly. It was sitting down, its eyes half shut. A few flies buzzed about its flank, and it switched its tail.

It sat. There was silence.

"It's a wub," Peterson said. "I got it from a native for fifty cents. He said it was a very unusual animal. Very respected."

"This?" Franco poked the great sloping side of the wub. "It's a pig! A huge dirty pig!"

"Yes sir, it's a pig. The natives call it a wub."

"A huge pig. It must weigh four hundred pounds." Franco grabbed a tuft of the rough hair. The wub gasped. Its eyes opened,

small and moist. Then its great mouth twitched.

A tear rolled down the wub's cheek and splashed on the floor.

"Maybe it's good to eat," Peterson said nervously.

"We'll soon find out," Franco said.

* * * *

The wub survived the take-off, sound asleep in the hold of the ship. When they were out in space and everything was running smoothly, Captain Franco bade his men fetch the wub upstairs so that he might perceive what manner of beast it was.

The wub grunted and wheezed, squeezing up the passageway.

"Come on," Jones grated, pulling at the rope. The wub twisted, rubbing its skin off on the smooth chrome walls. It burst into the anteroom, tumbling down in a heap. The men leaped up.

"Good Lord," French said. "What is it?"

"Peterson says it's a wub," Jones said. "It belongs to him." He kicked at the wub. The wub stood up unsteadily, panting.

"What's the matter with it?" French came over. "Is it going to be sick?"

They watched. The wub rolled its eyes mournfully. It gazed around at the men.

"I think it's thirsty," Peterson said. He went to get some water. French shook his head.

"No wonder we had so much trouble taking off. I had to reset all my ballast calculations."

Peterson came back with the water. The wub began to lap gratefully, splashing the men.

Captain Franco appeared at the door.

"Let's have a look at it." He advanced, squinting critically. "You got this for fifty cents?"

"Yes, sir," Peterson said. "It eats almost anything. I fed it on grain and it liked that. And then potatoes, and mash, and scraps from the table, and milk. It seems to enjoy eating. After it eats it lies down and goes to sleep."

"I see," Captain Franco said. "Now, as to its taste. That's the real question. I doubt if there's much point in fattening it up any more. It seems fat enough to me already. Where's the cook? I want him here. I want to find out—"

The wub stopped lapping and looked up at the Captain.

"Really, Captain," the wub said. "I suggest we talk of other matters."

The room was silent.

"What was that?" Franco said. "Just now."

"The wub, sir," Peterson said. "It spoke."

They all looked at the wub.

"What did it say? What did it say?"

"It suggested we talk about other things."

Franco walked toward the wub. He went all around it, examining it from every side. Then he came back over and stood with the men.

"I wonder if there's a native inside it," he said thoughtfully. "Maybe we should open it up and have a look."

"Oh, goodness!" the wub cried. "Is that all you people can think of, killing and cutting?"

Franco clenched his fists. "Come out of there! Whoever you are, come out!"

Nothing stirred. The men stood together, their faces blank, staring at the wub. The wub swished its tail. It belched suddenly.

"I beg your pardon," the wub said.

"I don't think there's anyone in there," Jones said in a low voice. They all looked at each other.

The cook came in.

"You wanted me, Captain?" he said. "What's this thing?"

"This is a wub," Franco said. "It's to be eaten. Will you measure it and figure out—"

"I think we should have a talk," the wub said. "I'd like to discuss this with you, Captain, if I might. I can see that you and I do not agree on some basic issues."

The Captain took a long time to answer. The wub waited good-naturedly, licking the water from its jowls.

"Come into my office," the Captain said at last. He turned and walked out of the room. The wub rose and padded after him. The men watched it go out. They heard it climbing the stairs.

"I wonder what the outcome will be," the cook said. "Well, I'll be in the kitchen. Let me know as soon as you hear."

"Sure," Jones said. "Sure."

* * * *

The wub eased itself down in the corner with a sigh. "You must forgive me," it said. "I'm afraid I'm addicted to various forms of relaxation. When one is as large as I—"

The Captain nodded impatiently. He sat down at his desk and folded his hands.

"All right," he said. "Let's get started. You're a wub? Is that correct?"

The wub shrugged. “I suppose so. That’s what they call us, the natives, I mean. We have our own term.”

“And you speak English? You’ve been in contact with Earthmen before?”

“No.”

“Then how do you do it?”

“Speak English? Am I speaking English? I’m not conscious of speaking anything in particular. I examined your mind—”

“My mind?”

“I studied the contents, especially the semantic warehouse, as I refer to it—”

“I see,” the Captain said. “Telepathy. Of course.”

“We are a very old race,” the wub said. “Very old and very ponderous. It is difficult for us to move around. You can appreciate that anything so slow and heavy would be at the mercy of more agile forms of life. There was no use in our relying on physical defenses. How could we win? Too heavy to run, too soft to fight, too good-natured to hunt for game—”

“How do you live?”

“Plants. Vegetables. We can eat almost anything. We’re very catholic. Tolerant, eclectic, catholic. We live and let live. That’s how we’ve gotten along.”

The wub eyed the Captain.

“And that’s why I so violently objected to this business about having me boiled. I could see the image in your mind—most of me in the frozen food locker, some of me in the kettle, a bit for your pet cat —”

“So you read minds?” the Captain said. “How interesting. Anything else? I mean, what else can you do along those lines?”

“A few odds and ends,” the wub said absently, staring around the room. “A nice apartment you have here, Captain. You keep it quite neat. I respect life-forms that are tidy. Some Martian birds are quite tidy. They throw things out of their nests and sweep them—”

“Indeed.” The Captain nodded. “But to get back to the problem —”

“Quite so. You spoke of dining on me. The taste, I am told, is good. A little fatty, but tender. But how can any lasting contact be established between your people and mine if you resort to such barbaric attitudes? Eat me? Rather you should discuss questions with me, philosophy, the arts—”

The Captain stood up. “Philosophy. It might interest you to know that we will be hard put to find something to eat for the next month. An unfortunate spoilage—”

“I know.” The wub nodded. “But wouldn’t it be more in accord

with your principles of democracy if we all drew straws, or something along that line? After all, democracy is to protect the minority from just such infringements. Now, if each of us casts one vote—"

The Captain walked to the door.

"Nuts to you," he said. He opened the door. He opened his mouth.

He stood frozen, his mouth wide, his eyes staring, his fingers still on the knob.

The wub watched him. Presently it padded out of the room, edging past the Captain. It went down the hall, deep in meditation.

* * * *

The room was quiet.

"So you see," the wub said, "we have a common myth. Your mind contains many familiar myth symbols. Ishtar, Odysseus—"

Peterson sat silently, staring at the floor. He shifted in his chair.

"Go on," he said. "Please go on."

"I find in your Odysseus a figure common to the mythology of most self-conscious races. As I interpret it, Odysseus wanders as an individual, aware of himself as such. This is the idea of separation, of separation from family and country. The process of individuation."

"But Odysseus returns to his home." Peterson looked out the port window, at the stars, endless stars, burning intently in the empty universe. "Finally he goes home."

"As must all creatures. The moment of separation is a temporary period, a brief journey of the soul. It begins, it ends. The wanderer returns to land and race…."

The door opened. The wub stopped, turning its great head.

Captain Franco came into the room, the men behind him. They hesitated at the door.

"Are you all right?" French said.

"Do you mean me?" Peterson said, surprised. "Why me?"

Franco lowered his gun. "Come over here," he said to Peterson. "Get up and come here."

There was silence.

"Go ahead," the wub said. "It doesn't matter."

Peterson stood up. "What for?"

"It's an order."

Peterson walked to the door. French caught his arm.

"What's going on?" Peterson wrenched loose. "What's the matter with you?"

Captain Franco moved toward the wub. The wub looked up from where it lay in the corner, pressed against the wall.

"It is interesting," the wub said, "that you are obsessed with the idea of eating me. I wonder why."

"Get up," Franco said.

"If you wish." The wub rose, grunting. "Be patient. It is difficult for me." It stood, gasping, its tongue lolling foolishly.

"Shoot it now," French said.

"For God's sake!" Peterson exclaimed. Jones turned to him quickly, his eyes gray with fear.

"You didn't see him—like a statue, standing there, his mouth open. If we hadn't come down, he'd still be there."

"Who? The Captain?" Peterson stared around. "But he's all right now."

They looked at the wub, standing in the middle of the room, its great chest rising and falling.

"Come on," Franco said. "Out of the way."

The men pulled aside toward the door.

"You are quite afraid, aren't you?" the wub said. "Have I done anything to you? I am against the idea of hurting. All I have done is try to protect myself. Can you expect me to rush eagerly to my death? I am a sensible being like yourselves. I was curious to see your ship, learn about you. I suggested to the native—"

The gun jerked.

"See," Franco said. "I thought so."

The wub settled down, panting. It put its paw out, pulling its tail around it.

"It is very warm," the wub said. "I understand that we are close to the jets. Atomic power. You have done many wonderful things with it—technically. Apparently, your scientific hierarchy is not equipped to solve moral, ethical—"

Franco turned to the men, crowding behind him, wide-eyed, silent.

"I'll do it. You can watch."

French nodded. "Try to hit the brain. It's no good for eating. Don't hit the chest. If the rib cage shatters, we'll have to pick bones out."

"Listen," Peterson said, licking his lips. "Has it done anything? What harm has it done? I'm asking you. And anyhow, it's still mine. You have no right to shoot it. It doesn't belong to you."

Franco raised his gun.

"I'm going out," Jones said, his face white and sick. "I don't want to see it."

"Me, too," French said. The men straggled out, murmuring. Peterson lingered at the door.

"It was talking to me about myths," he said. "It wouldn't hurt

anyone."

He went outside.

Franco walked toward the wub. The wub looked up slowly. It swallowed.

"A very foolish thing," it said. "I am sorry that you want to do it. There was a parable that your Saviour related—"

It stopped, staring at the gun.

"Can you look me in the eye and do it?" the wub said. "Can you do that?"

The Captain gazed down. "I can look you in the eye," he said. "Back on the farm we had hogs, dirty razor-back hogs. I can do it."

Staring down at the wub, into the gleaming, moist eyes, he pressed the trigger.

* * * *

The taste was excellent.

They sat glumly around the table, some of them hardly eating at all. The only one who seemed to be enjoying himself was Captain Franco.

"More?" he said, looking around. "More? And some wine, perhaps."

"Not me," French said. "I think I'll go back to the chart room."

"Me, too." Jones stood up, pushing his chair back. "I'll see you later."

The Captain watched them go. Some of the others excused themselves.

"What do you suppose the matter is?" the Captain said. He turned to Peterson. Peterson sat staring down at his plate, at the potatoes, the green peas, and at the thick slab of tender, warm meat.

He opened his mouth. No sound came.

The Captain put his hand on Peterson's shoulder.

"It is only organic matter, now," he said. "The life essence is gone." He ate, spooning up the gravy with some bread. "I, myself, love to eat. It is one of the greatest things that a living creature can enjoy. Eating, resting, meditation, discussing things."

Peterson nodded. Two more men got up and went out. The Captain drank some water and sighed.

"Well," he said. "I must say that this was a very enjoyable meal. All the reports I had heard were quite true—the taste of wub. Very fine. But I was prevented from enjoying this pleasure in times past."

He dabbed at his lips with his napkin and leaned back in his chair. Peterson stared dejectedly at the table.

The Captain watched him intently. He leaned over.

"Come, come," he said. "Cheer up! Let's discuss things."

He smiled.

"As I was saying before I was interrupted, the role of Odysseus in the myths—"

Peterson jerked up, staring.

"To go on," the Captain said. "Odysseus, as I understand him—"

PICTURES DON'T LIE, by Katherine MacLean

The man from the *News* asked, "What do you think of the aliens, Mr. Nathen? Are they friendly? Do they look human?"

"Very human," said the thin young man.

Outside, rain sleeted across the big windows with a steady, faint drumming, blurring and dimming the view of the airfield where *They* would arrive. On the concrete runways the puddles were pockmarked with rain, and the grass growing untouched between the runways of the unused field glistened wetly, bending before gusts of wind.

Back at a respectful distance from the place where the huge spaceship would land were the gray shapes of trucks, where TV camera crews huddled inside their mobile units, waiting. Farther back in the deserted, sandy landscape, behind distant sandy hills, artillery was ringed in a great circle, and in the distance across the horizon bombers stood ready at airfields, guarding the world against possible treachery from the first alien ship ever to land from space.

"Do you know anything about their home planet?" asked the man from the *Herald.*

The *Times* man stood with the others, listening absently, thinking of questions but reserving them. Joseph R. Nathen, the thin young man with the straight black hair and the tired lines on his face, was being treated with respect by his interviewers. He was obviously on edge, and they did not want to harry him with too many questions at once. They wanted to keep his good will. Tomorrow he would be one of the biggest celebrities ever to appear in headlines.

"No, nothing directly."

"Any ideas or deductions?" the *Herald* persisted.

"Their world must be Earthlike to them," the weary-looking young man answered uncertainly. "The environment evolves the animal. But only in relative terms, of course." He looked at them with a quick glance and then looked away evasively, his lank black hair beginning to cling to his forehead with sweat. "That doesn't necessarily mean anything."

"Earthlike," muttered a reporter, writing it down as if he had noticed nothing more in the reply.

The *Times* man glanced at the *Herald,* wondering if he had noticed, and received a quick glance in exchange.

The *Herald* asked Nathen, "You think they are dangerous, then?"

It was the kind of question, assuming much, that usually broke reticence and brought forth quick facts—when it hit the mark. They

all knew of the military precautions, although they were not supposed to know.

The question missed. Nathen glanced out the window vaguely. "No, I wouldn't say so."

"You think they are friendly, then?" said the *Herald*, equally positive on the opposite tack.

A fleeting smile touched Nathen's lips. "Those I know are."

There was no lead in this direction, and they had to get the basic facts of the story before the ship came. The *Times* asked, "What led up to your contacting them?"

Nathen answered, after a hesitation, "Static. Radio static. The Army told you my job, didn't they?"

The Army had told them nothing at all. The officer who had conducted them in for the interview stood glowering watchfully, as if he objected by instinct to telling anything to the public.

Nathen glanced at him doubtfully. "My job is radio decoder for the Department of Military Intelligence. I use a directional pickup, tune in on foreign bands, record any scrambled or coded messages I hear, and build automatic decoders and descramblers for all the basic scramble patterns."

The officer cleared his throat but said nothing. The reporters smiled, noting that down.

Security regulations had changed since arms inspection had been legalized by the U.N. Complete information being the only public security against secret rearmament, spying and prying had come to seem a public service. Its aura had changed. It was good public relations to admit to it.

Nathen continued, "In my spare time I started directing the pickup at stars. There's radio noise from stars, you know. Just stuff that sounds like spatter static, and an occasional squawk. People have been listening to it for a long time, and researching, trying to work out why stellar radiation on those bands comes in such jagged bursts. It didn't seem natural."

He paused and smiled uncertainly, aware that the next thing he would say was the thing that would make him famous—an idea that had come to him while he listened, an idea as simple and as perfect as the one that came to Newton when he saw the apple fall.

"I decided it wasn't natural. I tried decoding it."

Hurriedly, he tried to explain it away and make it seem obvious. "You see, there's an old intelligence trick, speeding up a message on a record until it sounds just like that, a short squawk of static, and then broadcasting it. Undergrounds use it. I'd heard that kind of screech before."

"You mean they broadcast at us in code?" asked the *News*.

"It's not exactly code. All you need to do is record it and slow it down. They're not broadcasting at us. If a star has planets, inhabited planets, and there is broadcasting between them, they would send it on a tight beam to save power." He looked for comprehension. "You know, like a spotlight. Theoretically, a tight beam can go on forever without losing power. But aiming would be difficult from planet to planet. You can't expect a beam to stay on target, over such distances, more than a few seconds at a time. So they'd naturally compress each message into a short half-second- or one-second-length package and send it a few hundred times in one long blast to make sure it is picked up during the instant the beam swings across the target."

He was talking slowly and carefully, remembering that this explanation was for the newspapers. "When a stray beam swings through our section of space, there's a sharp peak in noise level from that direction. The beams are swinging to follow their own planets at home, and the distance between there and here exaggerates the speed of swing tremendously, so we wouldn't pick up more than a bip as it passes."

"How do you account for the number of squawks coming in?" the *Times* asked. "Do stellar systems rotate on the plane of the Galaxy?" It was a private question; he spoke impulsively from interest and excitement.

The radio decoder grinned, the lines of strain vanishing from his face for a moment. "Maybe we're intercepting everybody's telephone calls, and the whole Galaxy is swarming with races that spend all day yacking at each other over the radio. Maybe the human type is standard model."

"It would take something like that," the *Times* agreed. They smiled at each other.

The *News* asked, "How did you happen to pick up television instead of voices?"

"Not by accident," Nathen explained patiently. "I'd recognized a scanning pattern, and I wanted pictures. Pictures are understandable in any language."

* * * *

Near the interviewers, a senator paced back and forth, muttering his memorized speech of welcome and nervously glancing out the wide, streaming windows into the gray, sleeting rain.

Opposite the windows of the long room was a small raised platform flanked by the tall shapes of TV cameras and sound pickups on booms, and darkened floodlights, arranged and ready for the

senator to make his speech of welcome to the aliens and the world. A shabby radio sending set stood beside it without a case to conceal its parts, two cathode television tubes flickering nakedly on one side and the speaker humming on the other. A vertical panel of dials and knobs jutted up before them, and a small hand. mike sat ready on the table before the panel. It was connected to a boxlike, expensively cased piece of equipment with "Radio Lab, U. S. Property" stenciled on it.

"I recorded a couple of package screeches from Sagittarius and began working on them," Nathen added. "It took a couple of months to find the synchronizing signals and set the scanners close enough to the right time to even get a pattern. When I showed the pattern to the Department, they gave me full time to work on it, and an assistant to help. It took eight months to pick out the color bands and assign them the right colors, to get anything intelligible on the screen."

The shabby-looking mess of exposed parts was the original receiver that they had labored over for ten months, adjusting and readjusting to reduce the maddening rippling plaids of unsynchronized color scanners to some kind of sane picture.

"Trial and error," said Nathen, "but it came out all right. The wide band spread of the squawks had suggested color TV from the beginning."

He walked over and touched the set. The speaker bipped slightly and the gray screen flickered with a flash of color at the touch. The set was awake and sensitive, tuned to receive from the great interstellar spaceship which now circled the atmosphere.

"We wondered why there were so many bands, but when we got the set working and started recording and playing everything that came in, we found we'd tapped something like a lending-library line. It was all fiction, plays."

Between the pauses in Nathen's voice, the *Times* found himself unconsciously listening for the sound of roaring, swiftly approaching rocket jets.

The *Post* asked, "How did you contact the spaceship?"

"I scanned and recorded a film copy of *The Rite of Spring,* the Disney-Stravinsky combination, and sent it back along the same line we were receiving from. Just testing. It wouldn't get there for a good number of years, if it got there at all, but I thought it would please the library to get a new record in.

"Two weeks later, when we caught and slowed a new batch of recordings, we found an answer. It was obviously meant for us. It was a flash of the Disney being played to a large audience, and then the audience sitting and waiting before a blank screen. The signal was very clear and loud. We'd intercepted a spaceship. They were asking for an encore, you see. They liked the film and wanted more… "

He smiled at them in sudden thought. “You can see them for yourself. It’s all right down the hall where the linguists are working on the automatic translator.”

The listening officer frowned and cleared his throat, and the thin young man turned to him quickly. “No security reason why they should not see the broadcasts, is there? Perhaps you should show them.” He said to the reporters reassuringly, “It’s right down the hall. You will be informed the moment the spaceship approaches.”

The interview was very definitely over. The lank-haired, nervous young man turned away and seated himself at the radio set while the officer swallowed his objections and showed them dourly down the hall to a closed door.

They opened it and fumbled, into a darkened room crowded with empty folding chairs, dominated by a glowing bright screen. The door closed behind them, bringing total darkness.

There was the sound of reporters fumbling their way into seats around him, but the *Times* man remained standing, aware of an enormous surprise, as if he had been asleep and wakened to find himself in the wrong country.

The bright colors of the double image seemed the only real thing in the darkened room. Even blurred as they were, he could see that the action was subtly different, the shapes subtly not right.

He was looking at aliens.

The impression was of two humans, disguised, humans moving oddly, half dancing, half crippled. Carefully, afraid the images would go away, he reached up to his breast pocket, took out his polarized glasses, rotated one lens at right angles to the other, and put them on.

Immediately, the two beings came into sharp focus, real and solid, and the screen became a wide, illusively near window through which he watched them.

They were conversing with each other in a gray-walled room, discussing something with restrained excitement. The large man in the green tunic closed his purple eyes for an instant at something the other said and grimaced, making a motion with his fingers as if shoving something away from him.

Mellerdrammer.

The second, smaller, with yellowish-green eyes, stepped closer, talking more rapidly in a lower voice. The first stood very still, not trying to interrupt.

Obviously, the proposal was some advantageous treachery, and he wanted to be persuaded. The *Times* groped for a chair and sat down.

Perhaps gesture is universal; desire and aversion, a leaning forward or a leaning back, tension, relaxation. Perhaps these actors

were masters. The scenes changed: a corridor, a parklike place in what he began to realize was a spaceship, a lecture room. There were others talking and working, speaking to the man in the green tunic, and never was it unclear what was happening or how they felt.

They talked a flowing language with many short vowels and shifts of pitch, and they gestured in the heat of talk, their hands moving with an odd lagging difference of motion, not slow, but somehow drifting.

He ignored the language, but after a time the difference in motion began to arouse his interest. Something in the way they walked.

With an effort, he pulled his mind from the plot and forced his attention to the physical difference. Brown hair in short, silky crew cuts, varied eye colors, the colors showing clearly because their irises were very large, their round eyes set very widely apart in tapering, light-brown faces. Their necks and shoulders were thick in a way that would indicate unusual strength for a human, but their wrists were narrow and their fingers long and thin and delicate.

There seemed to be more than the usual number of fingers.

Since he came in, a machine had been whirring and a voice muttering beside him. He turned from counting their fingers and looked around. Beside him sat an alert-looking man wearing earphones, watching and listening with hawk-like concentration. Beside him was a tall streamlined box.

From the screen came the sound of the alien language. The man abruptly flipped a switch on the box, muttered a word into a small hand microphone, and flipped the switch back with nervous rapidity.

He reminded the *Times* man of the earphoned interpreters at the U.N. The machine was probably a vocal translator and the mutterer a linguist adding to its vocabulary. Near the screen were two other linguists taking notes.

The *Times* remembered the senator pacing in the observatory room, rehearsing his speech of welcome. The speech would not be just the empty pompous gesture he had expected. It would be translated mechanically and understood by the aliens.

On the other side of the glowing window that was the stereo screen the large protagonist in the green tunic was speaking to a pilot in a gray uniform. They stood in a brightly lit canary-yellow control room in a spaceship.

The *Times* tried to pick up the thread of the plot. Already he was interested in the fate of the hero, and liked him. That was the effect of good acting, probably, for part of the art of acting is to win affection from the audience, and this actor might be the matinee idol of whole Solar Systems.

Controlled tension, betraying itself by a jerk of the hands, a too

quick answer to a question. The uniformed one, not suspicious, turned his back, busying himself at some task involving a map lit with glowing red points, his motions sharing the same fluid, dragging grace of the others, as if they were under water or on a slow-motion film. The other was watching a switch, a switch set into a panel, moving closer to it, talking casually—background music coming and rising in thin chords of tension.

There was a close-up of the alien's face watching the switch, and the *Times* noted that his ears were symmetrical half circles, almost perfect, with no earholes visible. The voice of the uniformed one answered—a brief word in a preoccupied, deep voice. His back was still turned. The other glanced at the switch, moving closer to it, talking casually, the switch coming closer and closer stereoscopically. It was in reach, filling the screen. His hand came into view, darted out, closed over the switch—

There was a sharp clap of sound and his hand opened in a frozen shape of pain. Beyond him, as his gaze swung up, stood the figure of the uniformed officer, unmoving, a weapon rigid in his hand, in the startled position in which he had turned and fired, watching with widening eyes as the man in the green tunic swayed and fell.

The tableau held, the uniformed one drooping, looking down at his hand holding the weapon which had killed, and music began to build in from the background. Just for an instant, the room and the things within it flashed into one of those bewildering color changes that were the bane of color television—to a color negative of itself, a green man standing in a violet control room, looking down at the body of a green man in a red tunic. It held for less than a second; then the color-band alternator fell back into phase and the colors reversed to normal.

Another uniformed man came and took the weapon from the limp hand of the other, who began to explain dejectedly in a low voice while the music mounted and covered his words and the screen slowly went blank, like a window that slowly filmed over with gray fog.

The music faded.

In the dark, someone clapped appreciatively.

The earphoned man beside the *Times* shifted his earphones back from his ears and spoke briskly. "I can't get any more. Either of you want a replay?"

There was a short silence until the linguist nearest the set said, "I guess we've squeezed that one dry. Let's run the tape where Nathen and that ship radio boy are kidding around CQing and tuning their beams in closer. I have a hunch the boy is talking routine ham talk and giving the old radio count—one-two-three-testing."

There was some fumbling in the semidark and then the screen

came to life again.

It showed a flash of an audience sitting before a screen and gave a clipped chord of some familiar symphony. “Crazy about Stravinsky and Mozart,” remarked the ear-phoned linguist to the *Times,* resettling his earphones. “Can’t stand Gershwin. Can you beat that?” He turned his attention back to the screen as the right sequence came on.

The *Post,* who was sitting just in front of him, turned to the *Times* and said, “Funny how much they look like people.” He was writing, making notes to telephone his report. “What color hair did that character have?”

“I didn’t notice.” He wondered if he should remind the reporter that Nathen had said he assigned the color bands on guess, choosing the colors that gave the most plausible images. The guests, when they arrived, could turn out to be bright green with blue hair. Only the gradations of color in the picture were sure, only the similarities and contrasts, the relationship of one color to another.

From the screen came the sound of the alien language again. This race averaged deeper voices than human. He liked deep voices. Could he write that?

No, there was something wrong with that, too. How had Nathen established the right sound-track pitch? Was it a matter of taking the modulation as it came in, or some sort of heterodyning up and down by trial and error? Probably.

It might be safer to assume that Nathen had simply preferred deep voices.

As he sat there, doubting, an uneasiness he had seen in Nathen came back to add to his own uncertainty, and he remembered just how close that uneasiness had come to something that looked like restrained fear.

“What I don’t get is why he went to all the trouble of picking up TV shows instead of just contacting them,” the *News* complained. “They’re good shows, but what’s the point?”

“Maybe so we’d get to learn their language, too,” said the *Herald.*

On the screen now was the obviously unstaged and genuine scene of a young alien working over a bank of apparatus. He turned and waved and opened his mouth in the comical 0 shape which the *Times* was beginning to recognize as their equivalent of a smile, then went back to trying to explain something about the equipment, in elaborate, awkward gestures and carefully mouthed words.

The *Times* got up quietly, went out into the bright white stone corridor, and walked back the way he had come, thoughtfully folding his stereo glasses and putting them away.

No one stopped him. Secrecy restrictions were ambiguous here. The reticence of the Army seemed more a matter of habit—mere

reflex, from the fact that it had all originated in the Intelligence Department—than any reasoned policy of keeping the landing a secret.

The main room was more crowded than he had left it. The TV camera and sound crew stood near their apparatus, the senator had found a chair and was reading, and at the far end of the room eight men were grouped in a circle of chairs, arguing something with impassioned concentration. The *Times* recognized a few he knew personally, eminent names in science, workers in field theory.

A stray phrase reached him: "—reference to the universal constants as ratio—" It was probably a discussion of ways of converting formulas from one mathematics to another for a rapid exchange of information.

They had reason to be intent, aware of the flood of insights that novel viewpoints could bring, if they could grasp them. He would have liked to go over and listen, but there was too little time left before the spaceship was due, and he had a question to ask.

* * * *

The hand-rigged transceiver was still humming, tuned to the sending band of the circling ship, and the young man who had started it all was sitting on the edge of the TV platform with his chin resting in one hand. He did not look up as the *Times* approached, but it was the indifference of preoccupation, not discourtesy.

The *Times* sat down on the edge of the platform beside him and took out a pack of cigarettes, then remembered the coming TV broadcast and the ban on smoking. He put them away, thoughtfully watching the diminishing rain spray against the streaming windows.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Nathen showed that he was aware and friendly by a slight motion of his head.

"*You* tell me."

"Hunch," said the *Times* man. "Sheer hunch. Everything sailing along too smoothly, everyone taking too much for granted."

Nathen relaxed slightly. "I'm still listening."

"Something about the way they move… "

Nathen shifted to glance at him.

"That's bothered me, too."

"Are you sure they're adjusted to the right speed?"

Nathen clenched his hands out in front of him and looked at them consideringly. "I don't know. When I turn the tape faster, they're all rushing, and you begin to wonder why their clothes don't stream

behind them, why the doors close so quickly and yet you can't hear them slam, why things fall so fast. If I turn it slower, they all seem to be swimming." He gave the *Times* a considering sideways glance. "Didn't catch the name."

Country-bred guy, thought the *Times.* "Jacob Luke, *Times,"* he said, extending his hand.

Nathen gave the hand a quick, hard grip, identifying the name. "Sunday Science Section editor. I read it. Surprised to meet you here."

"Likewise." The *Times* smiled. "Look, have you gone into this rationally, with formulas?" He found a pencil in his pocket. "Obviously, there's something wrong with our judgment of their weight-to-speed-to-momentum ratio. Maybe it's something simple, like low gravity aboard ship, with magnetic shoes. Maybe they *are* floating slightly."

"Why worry?" Nathen cut in "I don't see any reason to try to figure it out now." He laughed and shoved back his black hair nervously. "We'll see them in twenty minutes."

"Will we?" asked the *Times* slowly.

There was a silence while the senator turned a page of his magazine with a slight crackling of paper and the scientists argued at the other end of the room. Nathen pushed at his lank black hair again, as if it were trying to fall forward in front of his eyes and keep him from seeing.

"Sure." The young man laughed suddenly, talked rapidly. "Sure we'll see them. Why shouldn't we, with all the government ready with welcome speeches, the whole Army turned out and hiding over the hill, reporters all around, newsreel cameras—everything set up to broadcast the landing to the world. The President himself shaking hands with me and waiting in Washington—"

He came to the truth without pausing for breath.

He said, "Hell, no, they won't get here. There's some mistake somewhere. Something's wrong. I should have told the brass hats yesterday when I started adding it up. Don't know why I didn't say anything. Scared, I guess. Too much top rank around here. Lost my nerve."

He clutched the *Times* man's sleeve. "Look. I don't know what—"

A green light flashed on the sending-receiving set. Nathen didn't look at it, but he stopped talking.

The loud-speaker on the set broke into a voice speaking in the aliens' language. The senator started and looked nervously at it, straightening his tie. The voice stopped.

Nathen turned and looked at the loud-speaker. His worry seemed to be gone.

"What is it?" the Times asked anxiously.

“He says they’ve slowed enough to enter the atmosphere now. They’ll be here in five to ten minutes, I guess. That’s Bud. He’s all excited. He says holy smoke, what a murky-looking planet we live on.” Nathen smiled. “Kidding.”

The *Times* was puzzled. “What does he mean, murky? It can’t be raining over much territory on Earth.” Outside, the rain was slowing and bright-blue patches of sky were shining through breaks in the cloud blanket, glittering blue light from the drops that ran down the windows. He tried to think of an explanation. “Maybe they’re trying to land on Venus.” The thought was ridiculous, he knew. The spaceship was following Nathen’s sending beam. It couldn’t miss Earth. “Bud” had to be kidding.

The green light glowed on the set again, and they stopped speaking, waiting for the message to be recorded, slowed, and replayed. The cathode screen came to life suddenly with a picture of the young man sitting at his sending set, his back turned, watching a screen at one side that showed a glimpse of a huge dark plain approaching. As the ship plunged down toward it, the illusion of solidity melted into a boiling turbulence of black clouds. They expanded in an inky swirl, looked huge for an instant, and then blackness swallowed the screen. The young alien swung around to face the camera, speaking a few words as he moved, made the 0 of a smile again, then flipped the switch and the screen went gray.

Nathen’s voice was suddenly toneless and strained. “He said something like break out the drinks, here they come.”

“The atmosphere doesn’t look like that,” the *Times* said at random, knowing he was saying something too obvious even to think about. “Not Earth’s atmosphere.”

Some people drifted up. “What did they say?”

“Entering the atmosphere, ought to be landing in five or ten minutes,” Nathen told them.

A ripple of heightened excitement ran through the room. Cameramen began adjusting the lens angles again, turning on the mike and checking it, turning on the floodlights. The scientists rose and stood near the window, still talking. The reporters trooped in from the hall and went to the windows to watch for the great event. The three linguists came in, trundling a large wheeled box that was the mechanical translator, supervising while it was hitched into the sound-broadcasting system.

“Landing where?” the *Times* asked Nathen brutally. “Why don’t you do something?”

“Tell me what to do and I’ll do it,” Nathen said quietly, not moving.

It was not sarcasm. Jacob Luke of the *Times* looked sideways at

the strained whiteness of his face and moderated his tone. “Can’t you contact them?”

“Not while they’re landing.”

“What now?” The *Times* took out a pack of cigarettes, remembered the rule against smoking, and put it back. “We just wait.” Nathen leaned his elbow on one knee and his chin in his hand.

They waited.

All the people in the room were waiting. There was no more conversation. A bald man of the scientist group was automatically buffing his fingernails over and over and inspecting them without seeing them; another absently polished his glasses, held them up to the light, put them on, and then a moment later took them off and began polishing again. The television crew concentrated on their jobs, moving quietly and efficiently, with perfectionist care, minutely arranging things that did not need to be arranged, checking things that had already been checked.

This was to be one of the great moments of human history, and they were all trying to forget that fact and remain impassive and wrapped up in the problems of their jobs, as good specialists should.

After an interminable age the *Times* consulted his watch. Three minutes had passed. He tried holding his breath a moment, listening for a distant approaching thunder of jets. There was no sound.

The sun came out from behind the clouds and lit up the field like a great spotlight on an empty stage.

Abruptly, the green light shone on the set again, indicating that a squawk message had been received. The recorder recorded it, slowed it, and fed it back to the speaker. It clicked and the sound was very loud in the still, tense room.

The screen remained gray, but Bud’s voice spoke a few words in the alien language. He stopped, the speaker clicked, and the light went out. When it was plain that nothing more would occur and no announcement was to be made of what was said, the people in the room turned back to the windows and talk picked up again.

Somebody told a joke and laughed alone.

One of the linguists remained turned toward the loudspeaker, then looked at the widening patches of blue sky showing out the window, his expression puzzled. He had understood.

“It’s dark,” the thin Intelligence Department decoder translated, low-voiced, to the man from the *Times*. “Your atmosphere is *thick*. That’s precisely what Bud said.”

Another three minutes. The *Times* caught himself about to light a cigarette and swore silently, blowing the match out and putting the cigarette back into its package. He listened for the sound of the rocket jets. It was time for the landing, yet he heard no blasts.

The green light came on in the transceiver.

Message in.

Instinctively, he came to his feet. Nathen abruptly was standing beside him. Then the message came in the voice he was coming to think of as Bud. It spoke and paused. Suddenly the *Times* knew.

"We've landed." Nathen whispered the words.

The wind blew across the open spaces of white concrete and damp soil that was the empty airfield, swaying the wet, shiny grass. The people in the room looked out, listening for the roar of jets, looking for the silver bulk of a spaceship in the sky.

Nathen moved, seating himself at the transmitter, switching it on to warm up, checking and balancing dials. Jacob Luke of the *Times* moved softly to stand behind his right shoulder, hoping he could be useful. Nathen made a half motion of his head, as if to glance back at him, unhooked two of the earphone sets hanging on the side of the tall streamlined box that was the automatic translator, plugged them in, and handed one back over his shoulder to the *Times* man.

The voice began to come from the speaker again.

Hastily, Jacob Luke fitted the earphones over his ears. He fancied he could hear Bud's voice tremble. For a moment it was just Bud's voice speaking the alien language, and then, very distant and clear in his earphones, he heard the recorded voice of the linguist say an English word, then a mechanical click and another clear word in the voice of one of the other translators, then another as the alien's voice flowed from the loud-speaker, the cool single words barely audible, overlapping and blending like translating thought, skipping unfamiliar words yet quite astonishingly clear.

"Radar shows no buildings or civilization near. The atmosphere around us registers as thick as glue. Tremendous gas pressure, low gravity, no light at all. You didn't describe it like this. Where are you, Joe? This isn't some kind of trick, is it?" Bud hesitated, was prompted by a deeper official voice, and jerked out the words.

"If it is a trick, we are ready to repel attack."

The linguist stood listening. He whitened slowly and beckoned the other linguists over to him and whispered to them.

Joseph Nathen looked at them with unwarranted bitter hostility while he picked up the hand mike, plugging it into the translator. "Joe calling," he said quietly into it in clear, slow English. "No trick. We don't know where you are. I am trying to get a direction fix from your signal. Describe your surroundings to us if at all possible."

Nearby, the floodlights blazed steadily on the television platform, ready for the official welcome of the aliens to Earth. The television channels of the world had been alerted to set aside their scheduled programs for an unscheduled great event. in the long room the people

waited, listening for the swelling sound of rocket jets.

This time, after the light came on, there was a long delay. The speaker sputtered and sputtered again, building to a steady scratching through which they could barely hear a dim voice. It came through in a few tinny words and then wavered back to inaudibility. The machine translated in their earphones.

"Tried… seemed… repair…" Suddenly it came in clearly. "Can't tell if the auxiliary blew, too. Will try it. We might pick you up clearly on the next try. I have the volume down. Where is the landing port? Repeat. Where is the landing port? Where are you?"

Nathen put down the hand mike and carefully set a dial on the recording box and flipped a switch, speaking over his shoulder. "This sets it to repeat what I said the last time. It keeps repeating." Then he sat with unnatural stillness, his head still half turned, as if he had suddenly caught a glimpse of answer and was trying with no success whatever to grasp it.

The green warning light cut in, the recording clicked, and the playback of Bud's face and voice appeared on the screen.

"We heard a few words, Joe, and then the receiver blew again. We're adjusting a viewing screen to pick up the long waves that go through the murk and convert them to visible light. We'll be able to see out soon. The engineer says that something is wrong with the stern jets, and the captain has had me broadcast a help call to our nearest space base." He made the mouth 0 of a grin. "The message won't reach it for some years. I trust you, Joe, but get us out of here, will you?— They're buzzing that the screen is finally ready. Hold everything."

The screen went gray and the green light went off.

The *Times* considered the lag required for the help call, the speaking and recording of the message just received, the time needed to reconvert a viewing screen.

"They work fast." He shifted uneasily and added at random, "Something wrong with the time factor. All wrong. They work too fast."

The green light came on again immediately. Nathen half turned to him, sliding his words hastily into the gap of time as the message was recorded and slowed. "They're close enough for our transmission power to blow their receiver."

If it was on Earth, why the darkness around the ship? "Maybe they see in the high ultraviolet—the atmosphere is opaque to that band," the *Times* suggested hastily as the speaker began to talk in the young extra-Terrestrial's voice.

That voice was shaking now. "Stand by for the description."

They tensed, waiting. The *Times* brought a map of the state before

his mind's eye.

"A half circle of cliffs around the horizon. A wide muddy lake swarming with swimming things. Huge, strange white foliage all around the ship and incredibly huge, pulpy monsters attacking and eating each other on all sides. We almost landed in the lake, right on the soft edge. The mud can't hold the ship's weight, and we're sinking. The engineer says we might be able to blast free, but the tubes are mud-clogged and might blow up the ship. When can you reach us?"

The *Times* thought vaguely of the Carboniferous era. Nathen obviously had seen something he had not.

"Where are they?" the Times asked him quietly.

Nathen pointed to the antenna position indicators. The Times let his eyes follow the converging imaginary lines of focus out the window to the sunlit airfield, the empty airfield, the drying concrete and green waving grass where the lines met.

Where the lines met. The spaceship was there!

The fear of something unknown gripped him suddenly.

The spaceship was broadcasting again, "Where are you? Answer if possible! We are sinking! Where are you?"

He saw that Nathen knew. "What is it?" the *Times* asked hoarsely. "Are they in another dimension or the past or on another world or what?"

Nathen was smiling bitterly, and Jacob Luke remembered that the young man had a friend in that spaceship. "My guess is that they evolved on a high-gravity planet with a thin atmosphere, near a blue-white star. Sure, they see in the ultraviolet range. Our sun is abnormally small and dim and yellow. Our atmosphere is so thick it screens out ultraviolet." He laughed harshly. "A good joke on us, the weird place we evolved in, the thing it did to us!"

"Where are you?" called the alien spaceship. "Hurry, please! We're sinking!"

* * * *

The decoder slowed his tumbled, frightened words and looked up into the *Times'* face for understanding. "We'll rescue them," he said quietly. "You were right about the time factor, right about them moving at a different speed. I misunderstood. This business about squawk coding, speeding for better transmission to counteract beam waver—I was wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"They don't speed up their broadcasts."

"They don't—?"

Suddenly, in his mind's eye, the *Times* began to see again the play he had just seen—but the actors were moving at blurring speed, the words jerking out in a fluting, dizzying stream, thoughts and decisions passing with unfollowable rapidity, rippling faces in a twisting blur of expressions, doors slamming wildly, shatteringly, as the actors leaped in and out of the rooms.

No—faster, faster—he wasn't visualizing it as rapidly as it was, an hour of talk and action in one almost instantaneous "squawk," a narrow peak of "noise" interfering with a single word in an Earth broadcast! Faster—faster—it was impossible. Matter could not stand such stress—inertia—momentum—abrupt weight.

It was insane. "Why?" he asked. "How?"

Nathen laughed again harshly, reaching for the mike. "Get them out? There isn't a lake or river within hundreds of miles from here!"

A shiver of unreality went down the *Times'* spine. Automatically and inanely, he found himself delving in his pockets for a cigarette while he tried to grasp what had happened. "Where are they, then? Why can't we see their spaceship?"

Nathen switched the microphone on in a gesture that showed the bitterness of his disappointment.

"We'll need a magnifying glass for that."

THE BIG TRIP UP YONDER, by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

Gramps Ford, his chin resting on his hands, his hands on the crook of his cane, was staring irascibly at the five-foot television screen that dominated the room. On the screen, a news commentator was summarizing the day's happenings. Every thirty seconds or so, Gramps would jab the floor with his cane-tip and shout, "Hell, we did that a hundred years ago!"

Emerald and Lou, coming in from the balcony, where they had been seeking that 2185 A.D. rarity—privacy—were obliged to take seats in the back row, behind Lou's father and mother, brother and sister-in-law, son and daughter-in-law, grandson and wife, granddaughter and husband, great-grandson and wife, nephew and wife, grandnephew and wife, great-grandniece and husband, great-grandnephew and wife—and, of course, Gramps, who was in front of everybody. All save Gramps, who was somewhat withered and bent, seemed, by pre-anti-gerasone standards, to be about the same age—somewhere in their late twenties or early thirties. Gramps looked older because he had already reached 70 when anti-gerasone was invented. He had not aged in the 102 years since.

"Meanwhile," the commentator was saying, "Council Bluffs, Iowa, was still threatened by stark tragedy. But 200 weary rescue workers have refused to give up hope, and continue to dig in an effort to save Elbert Haggedorn, 183, who has been wedged for two days in a…"

"I wish he'd get something more cheerful," Emerald whispered to Lou.

"Silence!" cried Gramps. "Next one shoots off his big bazoo while the TV's on is gonna find hisself cut off without a dollar—"his voice suddenly softened and sweetened—"when they wave that checkered flag at the Indianapolis Speedway, and old Gramps gets ready for the Big Trip Up Yonder."

He sniffed sentimentally, while his heirs concentrated desperately on not making the slightest sound. For them, the poignancy of the prospective Big Trip had been dulled somewhat, through having been mentioned by Gramps about once a day for fifty years.

"Dr. Brainard Keyes Bullard," continued the commentator, "President of Wyandotte College, said in an address tonight that most of the world's ills can be traced to the fact that Man's knowledge of himself has not kept pace with his knowledge of the physical world."

"*Hell!*" snorted Gramps. "We said *that* a hundred years ago!"

"In Chicago tonight," the commentator went on, "a special

celebration is taking place in the Chicago Lying-in Hospital. The guest of honor is Lowell W. Hitz, age zero. Hitz, born this morning, is the twenty-five-millionth child to be born in the hospital." The commentator faded, and was replaced on the screen by young Hitz, who squalled furiously.

"Hell!" whispered Lou to Emerald. "We said that a hundred years ago."

"I heard that!" shouted Gramps. He snapped off the television set and his petrified descendants stared silently at the screen. "You, there, boy—"

"I didn't mean anything by it, sir," said Lou, aged 103.

"Get me my will. You know where it is. You kids *all* know where it is. Fetch, boy!" Gramps snapped his gnarled fingers sharply.

Lou nodded dully and found himself going down the hall, picking his way over bedding to Gramps' room, the only private room in the Ford apartment. The other rooms were the bathroom, the living room and the wide windowless hallway, which was originally intended to serve as a dining area, and which had a kitchenette in one end. Six mattresses and four sleeping bags were dispersed in the hallway and living room, and the daybed, in the living room, accommodated the eleventh couple, the favorites of the moment.

On Gramps' bureau was his will, smeared, dog-eared, perforated and blotched with hundreds of additions, deletions, accusations, conditions, warnings, advice and homely philosophy. The document was, Lou reflected, a fifty-year diary, all jammed onto two sheets—a garbled, illegible log of day after day of strife. This day, Lou would be disinherited for the eleventh time, and it would take him perhaps six months of impeccable behavior to regain the promise of a share in the estate. To say nothing of the daybed in the living room for Em and himself.

"Boy!" called Gramps.

"Coming, sir." Lou hurried back into the living room and handed Gramps the will.

"Pen!" said Gramps.

He was instantly offered eleven pens, one from each couple.

"Not *that* leaky thing," he said, brushing Lou's pen aside. "Ah, *there's* a nice one. Good boy, Willy." He accepted Willy's pen. That was the tip they had all been waiting for. Willy, then—Lou's father—was the new favorite.

Willy, who looked almost as young as Lou, though he was 142, did a poor job of concealing his pleasure. He glanced shyly at the daybed, which would become his, and from which Lou and Emerald would have to move back into the hall, back to the worst spot of all by the bathroom door.

Gramps missed none of the high drama he had authored and he gave his own familiar role everything he had. Frowning and running his finger along each line, as though he were seeing the will for the first time, he read aloud in a deep portentous monotone, like a bass note on a cathedral organ.

"I, Harold D. Ford, residing in Building 257 of Alden Village, New York City, Connecticut, do hereby make, publish and declare this to be my last Will and Testament, revoking any and all former wills and codicils by me at any time heretofore made." He blew his nose importantly and went on, not missing a word, and repeating many for emphasis—repeating in particular his ever-more-elaborate specifications for a funeral.

At the end of these specifications, Gramps was so choked with emotion that Lou thought he might have forgotten why he'd brought out the will in the first place. But Gramps heroically brought his powerful emotions under control and, after erasing for a full minute, began to write and speak at the same time. Lou could have spoken his lines for him, he had heard them so often.

"I have had many heartbreaks ere leaving this vale of tears for a better land," Gramps said and wrote. "But the deepest hurt of all has been dealt me by—" He looked around the group, trying to remember who the malefactor was.

Everyone looked helpfully at Lou, who held up his hand resignedly.

Gramps nodded, remembering, and completed the sentence—"my great-grandson, Louis J. Ford."

"Grandson, sir," said Lou.

"Don't quibble. You're in deep enough now, young man," said Gramps, but he made the change. And, from there, he went without a misstep through the phrasing of the disinheritance, causes for which were disrespectfulness and quibbling.

In the paragraph following, the paragraph that had belonged to everyone in the room at one time or another, Lou's name was scratched out and Willy's substituted as heir to the apartment and, the biggest plum of all, the double bed in the private bedroom.

"So!" said Gramps, beaming. He erased the date at the foot of the will and substituted a new one, including the time of day. "Well—time to watch the McGarvey Family." The McGarvey Family was a television serial that Gramps had been following since he was 60, or for a total of 112 years. "I can't wait to see what's going to happen next," he said.

Lou detached himself from the group and lay down on his bed of pain by the bathroom door. Wishing Em would join him, he wondered where she was.

He dozed for a few moments, until he was disturbed by someone stepping over him to get into the bathroom. A moment later, he heard a faint gurgling sound, as though something were being poured down the washbasin drain. Suddenly, it entered his mind that Em had cracked up, that she was in there doing something drastic about Gramps.

"Em?" he whispered through the panel. There was no reply, and Lou pressed against the door. The worn lock, whose bolt barely engaged its socket, held for a second, then let the door swing inward.

"Morty!" gasped Lou.

Lou's great-grandnephew, Mortimer, who had just married and brought his wife home to the Ford menage, looked at Lou with consternation and surprise. Morty kicked the door shut, but not before Lou had glimpsed what was in his hand—Gramps' enormous economy-size bottle of anti-gerasone, which had apparently been half-emptied, and which Morty was refilling with tap water.

A moment later, Morty came out, glared defiantly at Lou and brushed past him wordlessly to rejoin his pretty bride.

Shocked, Lou didn't know what to do. He couldn't let Gramps take the mousetrapped anti-gerasone—but, if he warned Gramps about it, Gramps would certainly make life in the apartment, which was merely insufferable now, harrowing.

Lou glanced into the living room and saw that the Fords, Emerald among them, were momentarily at rest, relishing the botches that the McGarveys had made of *their* lives. Stealthily, he went into the bathroom, locked the door as well as he could and began to pour the contents of Gramps' bottle down the drain. He was going to refill it with full-strength anti-gerasone from the 22 smaller bottles on the shelf.

The bottle contained a half-gallon, and its neck was small, so it seemed to Lou that the emptying would take forever. And the almost imperceptible smell of anti-gerasone, like Worcestershire sauce, now seemed to Lou, in his nervousness, to be pouring out into the rest of the apartment, through the keyhole and under the door.

The bottle gurgled monotonously. Suddenly, up came the sound of music from the living room and there were murmurs and the scraping of chair-legs on the floor. "Thus ends," said the television announcer, "the 29,121st chapter in the life of your neighbors and mine, the McGarveys." Footsteps were coming down the hall. There was a knock on the bathroom door.

"Just a sec," Lou cheerily called out. Desperately, he shook the big bottle, trying to speed up the flow. His palms slipped on the wet glass, and the heavy bottle smashed on the tile floor.

The door was pushed open, and Gramps, dumbfounded, stared at

the incriminating mess.

Lou felt a hideous prickling sensation on his scalp and the back of his neck. He grinned engagingly through his nausea and, for want of anything remotely resembling a thought, waited for Gramps to speak.

"Well, boy," said Gramps at last, "looks like you've got a little tidying up to do."

And that was all he said. He turned around, elbowed his way through the crowd and locked himself in his bedroom.

The Fords contemplated Lou in incredulous silence a moment longer, and then hurried back to the living room, as though some of his horrible guilt would taint them, too, if they looked too long. Morty stayed behind long enough to give Lou a quizzical, annoyed glance. Then he also went into the living room, leaving only Emerald standing in the doorway.

Tears streamed over her cheeks. "Oh, you poor lamb—*please* don't look so awful! It was my fault. I put you up to this with my nagging about Gramps."

"No," said Lou, finding his voice, "really you didn't. Honest, Em, I was just—"

"You don't have to explain anything to me, hon. I'm on your side, no matter what." She kissed him on one cheek and whispered in his ear, "It wouldn't have been murder, hon. It wouldn't have killed him. It wasn't such a terrible thing to do. It just would have fixed him up so he'd be able to go any time God decided He wanted him."

"What's going to happen next, Em?" said Lou hollowly. "What's he going to do?"

Lou and Emerald stayed fearfully awake almost all night, waiting to see what Gramps was going to do. But not a sound came from the sacred bedroom. Two hours before dawn, they finally dropped off to sleep.

At six o'clock, they arose again, for it was time for their generation to eat breakfast in the kitchenette. No one spoke to them. They had twenty minutes in which to eat, but their reflexes were so dulled by the bad night that they had hardly swallowed two mouthfuls of egg-type processed seaweed before it was time to surrender their places to their son's generation.

Then, as was the custom for whoever had been most recently disinherited, they began preparing Gramps' breakfast, which would presently be served to him in bed, on a tray. They tried to be cheerful about it. The toughest part of the job was having to handle the honest-to-God eggs and bacon and oleomargarine, on which Gramps spent so much of the income from his fortune.

"Well," said Emerald, "I'm not going to get all panicky until I'm sure there's something to be panicky about."

"Maybe he doesn't know what it was I busted," Lou said hopefully.

"Probably thinks it was your watch crystal," offered Eddie, their son, who was toying apathetically with his buckwheat-type processed sawdust cakes.

"Don't get sarcastic with your father," said Em, "and don't talk with your mouth full, either."

"I'd like to see anybody take a mouthful of this stuff and *not* say something," complained Eddie, who was 73. He glanced at the clock. "It's time to take Gramps his breakfast, you know."

"Yeah, it is, isn't it?" said Lou weakly. He shrugged. "Let's have the tray, Em."

"We'll both go."

Walking slowly, smiling bravely, they found a large semi-circle of long-faced Fords standing around the bedroom door.

Em knocked. "Gramps," she called brightly, "*break*-fast is *rea*-dy."

There was no reply and she knocked again, harder.

The door swung open before her fist. In the middle of the room, the soft, deep, wide, canopied bed, the symbol of the sweet by-and-by to every Ford, was empty.

A sense of death, as unfamiliar to the Fords as Zoroastrianism or the causes of the Sepoy Mutiny, stilled every voice, slowed every heart. Awed, the heirs began to search gingerly, under the furniture and behind the drapes, for all that was mortal of Gramps, father of the clan.

* * * *

But Gramps had left not his Earthly husk but a note, which Lou finally found on the dresser, under a paperweight which was a treasured souvenir from the World's Fair of 2000. Unsteadily, Lou read it aloud:

"'Somebody who I have sheltered and protected and taught the best I know how all these years last night turned on me like a mad dog and diluted my anti-gerasone, or tried to. I am no longer a young man. I can no longer bear the crushing burden of life as I once could. So, after last night's bitter experience, I say good-by. The cares of this world will soon drop away like a cloak of thorns and I shall know peace. By the time you find this, I will be gone.'"

"Gosh," said Willy brokenly, "he didn't even get to see how the 5000-mile Speedway Race was going to come out."

"Or the Solar Series," Eddie said, with large mournful eyes.

"Or whether Mrs. McGarvey got her eyesight back," added Morty.

"There's more," said Lou, and he began reading aloud again: "'I, Harold D. Ford, etc., do hereby make, publish and declare this to be my last Will and Testament, revoking any and all former wills and codicils by me at any time heretofore made.'"

"No!" cried Willy. "Not another one!"

"'I do stipulate,'" read Lou, "'that all of my property, of whatsoever kind and nature, not be divided, but do devise and bequeath it to be held in common by my issue, without regard for generation, equally, share and share alike.'"

"Issue?" said Emerald.

Lou included the multitude in a sweep of his hand. "It means we all own the whole damn shootin' match."

Each eye turned instantly to the bed.

"Share and share alike?" asked Morty.

"Actually," said Willy, who was the oldest one present, "it's just like the old system, where the oldest people head up things with their headquarters in here and—"

"I like *that*!" exclaimed Em. "Lou owns as much of it as you do, and I say it ought to be for the oldest one who's still working. You can snooze around here all day, waiting for your pension check, while poor Lou stumbles in here after work, all tuckered out, and—"

"How about letting somebody who's never had *any* privacy get a little crack at it?" Eddie demanded hotly. "Hell, you old people had plenty of privacy back when you were kids. I was born and raised in the middle of that goddamn barracks in the hall! How about—"

"Yeah?" challenged Morty. "Sure, you've all had it pretty tough, and my heart bleeds for you. But try honeymooning in the hall for a real kick."

"*Silence!*" shouted Willy imperiously. "The next person who opens his mouth spends the next sixth months by the bathroom. Now clear out of my room. I want to think."

A vase shattered against the wall, inches above his head.

* * * *

In the next moment, a free-for-all was under way, with each couple battling to eject every other couple from the room. Fighting coalitions formed and dissolved with the lightning changes of the tactical situation. Em and Lou were thrown into the hall, where they organized others in the same situation, and stormed back into the room.

After two hours of struggle, with nothing like a decision in sight, the cops broke in, followed by television cameramen from mobile

units.

For the next half-hour, patrol wagons and ambulances hauled away Fords, and then the apartment was still and spacious.

An hour later, films of the last stages of the riot were being televised to 500,000,000 delighted viewers on the Eastern Seaboard.

In the stillness of the three-room Ford apartment on the 76th floor of Building 257, the television set had been left on. Once more the air was filled with the cries and grunts and crashes of the fray, coming harmlessly now from the loudspeaker.

The battle also appeared on the screen of the television set in the police station, where the Fords and their captors watched with professional interest.

Em and Lou, in adjacent four-by-eight cells, were stretched out peacefully on their cots.

"Em," called Lou through the partition, "you got a washbasin all your own, too?"

"Sure. Washbasin, bed, light—the works. And we thought *Gramps'* room was something. How long has this been going on?" She held out her hand. "For the first time in forty years, hon, I haven't got the shakes—look at me!"

"Cross your fingers," said Lou. "The lawyer's going to try to get us a year."

"Gee!" Em said dreamily. "I wonder what kind of wires you'd have to pull to get put away in solitary?"

"All right, pipe down," said the turnkey, "or I'll toss the whole kit and caboodle of you right out. And first one who lets on to anybody outside how good jail is ain't never getting back in!"

The prisoners instantly fell silent.

* * * *

The living room of the apartment darkened for a moment as the riot scenes faded on the television screen, and then the face of the announcer appeared, like the Sun coming from behind a cloud. "And now, friends," he said, "I have a special message from the makers of anti-gerasone, a message for all you folks over 150. Are you hampered socially by wrinkles, by stiffness of joints and discoloration or loss of hair, all because these things came upon you before anti-gerasone was developed? Well, if you are, you need no longer suffer, need no longer feel different and out of things.

"After years of research, medical science has now developed *Super*-anti-gerasone! In weeks—yes, weeks—you can look, feel and act as young as your great-great-grandchildren! Wouldn't you pay $5,000

to be indistinguishable from everybody else? Well, you don't have to. Safe, tested *Super*-anti-gerasone costs you only a few dollars a day.

"Write now for your free trial carton. Just put your name and address on a dollar postcard, and mail it to '*Super*,' Box 500,000, Schenectady, N. Y. Have you got that? I'll repeat it. '*Super*,' Box 500,000…"

Underlining the announcer's words was the scratching of Gramps' pen, the one Willy had given him the night before. He had come in, a few minutes earlier, from the Idle Hour Tavern, which commanded a view of Building 257 from across the square of asphalt known as the Alden Village Green. He had called a cleaning woman to come straighten the place up, then had hired the best lawyer in town to get his descendants a conviction, a genius who had never gotten a client less than a year and a day. Gramps had then moved the daybed before the television screen, so that he could watch from a reclining position. It was something he'd dreamed of doing for years.

"Schen-*ec*-ta-dy," murmured Gramps. "Got it!" His face had changed remarkably. His facial muscles seemed to have relaxed, revealing kindness and equanimity under what had been taut lines of bad temper. It was almost as though his trial package of *Super*-anti-gerasone had already arrived. When something amused him on television, he smiled easily, rather than barely managing to lengthen the thin line of his mouth a millimeter.

Life was good. He could hardly wait to see what was going to happen next.

STORM WARNING, by Donald A. Wollheim

We had no indication of the odd business that was going to happen. The boys at the Weather Bureau still think they had all the fun. They think that being out in it wasn't as good as sitting in the station watching it all come about. Only there are some things they'll never understand about the weather, some things I think Ed and I alone will know. We were in the middle of it all.

We were riding out of Rock Springs at sunrise on a three-day leave, but the Chief Meteorologist had asked us to take the night shift until then. It was just as well, for the Bureau was on the edge of the desert and we had our duffel and horses tethered outside. The meteor fall of two days before came as a marvelous excuse to go out into the badlands of the Great Divide Basin. I've always liked to ride out in the glorious, wide, empty Wyoming land, and any excuse to spend three days out there was good.

Free also from the routine and monotony of the Weather Bureau as well. Of course, I like the work, but still the open air and the open spaces must be bred in the blood of all of us born and raised out there in the West. I know it's tame and civilized today, but even so, to jog along with a haphazard sort of prospector's aim was really fine.

Aim was, of course, to try to locate fragments of the big meteor that had landed out there two nights before. Lots of people had seen it, myself for one, because I happened to be out on the roof taking readings. There had been a brilliant streak of blue-white across the northern sky and a sharp flash way off, like an explosion. I understand that folks in Superior claim to have felt a jolt, as if something big had smashed up out there in the trackless dust and dunes between Mud Lake, Morrow Creek, and the town. That's quite a lot of empty territory, and Ed and I had about as much chance of finding the meteor as the well-known needle in the haystack. But it was a swell excuse.

"Cold front coming down from Saskatchewan," the Chief said as he came in and looked over our charts. We were getting ready to leave. "Unusual for this time of year."

I nodded, unworried. We had the mountains between us and any cold wave from that direction. We wouldn't freeze at night even if the cold got down as far as Casper, which would be highly unlikely. The Chief was bending low over the map, tracing out the various lows and highs. He frowned a bit when he came to a new little low I had traced in from the first reports of that day.

“An unreported low turning up just off Washington state. That’s really odd. Since when are storms originating so close?”

“Coming east, too, and growing, according to Seattle’s wire,” said Ed. The Chief sat down and stared at the map.

“I don’t like it, it’s all out of whack,” he said. Then he stood up and held out his hand to me.

“Well, good-by, boys, and have a good time. If you find that meteor, bring me back a chunk, too.”

“Sure will,” I said, and we shook hands and yelled at the other boys and went out.

The first rays of the sun were just coming up as we left. Outwards we jogged, the town and civilization fell behind rapidly, and we went on into the golden glow of the Sweetwater basin.

We made good time that day, though we didn’t hurry. We kept up a nice, steady trot, resting now and then. We didn’t talk much, for we were too busy just breathing in the clean open air and enjoying the sensation of freedom. An occasional desert toad or the flash of a disturbed snake were the only signs of life we saw, and the multiform shapes of the cactus and sage our only garden. It was enough.

Toward evening, at the Bureau, the Chief first noted the slight growth of the southern warm front. A report from Utah set him buzzing. The cold front had now reached the borders of Wyoming and was still moving on. The baby storm that was born where it had no right to be born was still growing and now occupied a large area over Oregon and Idaho. The Chief was heard to remark that the conjunction of things seemed to place southwest Wyoming as a possible center of lots of wild weather. He started worrying a bit about us, too.

We didn’t worry. We didn’t have any real indications, but our weathermen’s senses acted aright. We felt a sort of odd expectancy in the air as we camped. Nothing definite—a sort of extra stillness in the air, as if forces were pressing from all sides, forces that were still far away and still vague.

We spoke a bit around the fire about the storm that the Chief had noted when we left. Ed thought it would fizzle out. I think I had a feeling then that it wasn’t just a short-lived freak. I think I had an idea we might see something of it.

Next morning there was just the faintest trace of extra chill in the air. I’m used to Wyoming mornings and I know just how cold it ought to be at sunrise and how hot. This morning it was just the slightest bit colder.

“That Canadian cold front must have reached the other side of the mountains,” I said, waving toward the great rampart of the Rockies to the East. “We’re probably feeling the only tendril of it to get over.”

"That's sort of odd," Ed said. "There shouldn't be any getting over at all. It must be a very powerful front."

I nodded and wondered what the boys in the Bureau were getting on it. Probably snowfall in the northern part of the state. If I had known what the Chief knew that morning, I might have started back in a hurry. But neither of us did, and I guess we saw something that no one else has, as a result.

For, at the Bureau, the Chief knew that morning that we were in for some extraordinary weather. He predicted for the Rock Springs paper the wildest storm ever. You see, the southern warm front had definitely gotten a salient through by that time. It was already giving Salt Lake City one of the hottest days on record, and what was more, the warm wave was coming our way steadily.

The next thing was that storm from the west. It was growing smaller and tighter again and had passed over Idaho Falls two hours earlier, raging and squalling. It was heading in our direction like an arrow from a bow.

And finally the cold front had done the impossible. It was beginning to sweep over the heights and to swoop down into the Divide Basin, heading straight for the warm front coming north.

And there were Ed and I with a premonition and nothing more. We were riding along right into the conflux of the whole mess, and we were looking for meteors. We were looking for what we expected to be some big craters or pockmarks in the ground and a bunch of pitted iron rocks scattered around a vicinity of several miles.

Toward ten that morning we came over a slight rise and dipped down into a bowl-shaped region. I stopped and stared around. Ed wheeled and came back.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Notice anything funny in the air?" I asked and gave a deep sniff.

Ed drew in some sharp breaths and stared around. "Sort of odd," he finally admitted. "Nothing I. can place, but it's sort of odd."

"Yes," I answered. "Odd is the word. I can't place anything wrong, but it seems to smell differently than the air did a few moments ago." I stared around and wrinkled my brow.

"I think I know now," I finally said. "The temperature's changed somewhat. It's warmer."

Ed frowned. "Colder, I'd say."

I became puzzled. I waved my hands through the air a bit. "I think you're right; I must be wrong. Now it feels a bit colder."

Ed walked his horse a bit. I stared after him.

"Y'know," I finally said, "I think I've got it. It's colder, but it *smells* like warm air. I don't know if you can quite understand what I'm driving at. It smells as if the temperature should be steaming, yet

actually it's sort of chilly. It doesn't smell natural."

Ed nodded. He was puzzled, and so was I. There was something wrong here. Something that got on our nerves.

Far ahead I saw something sparkle. I stared as we rode and then mentioned it to Ed. He looked, too.

There was something, no, several things far off at the edge of the bowl near the next rise, that glistened. They looked like bits of glass.

"The meteor, maybe?" queried Ed. I shrugged. We rode on steadily in that direction.

"Say, something smells funny here," Ed remarked, stopping again.

I came up next to him. He was right. The sense of strangeness in the air had increased, the nearer we got to the glistening things. It was still the same—warm-cold. There was something else again. Something like vegetation in the air. Like something growing, only there still wasn't any more growth than the usual cactus and sage. It smelled differently from any other growing things, and yet it smelled like vegetation.

It was unearthly, that air. I can't describe it any other way. It was unearthly. Plant smells that couldn't come from any plant or forest I ever encountered, a cold warmness unlike anything that meteorology records.

Yet it wasn't bad, it wasn't frightening. It was just peculiar. It was mystifying.

We could see the sparkling things now. They were like bubbles of glass. Big, iridescent, glassy balls lying like some giant child's marbles on the desert.

We knew then that, if they were the meteors, they were like none that had ever been recorded before. We knew we had made a find that would go on record, and yet we weren't elated. We were ill at ease. It was the funny weather that did it.

I noticed then for the first time that there were black clouds beginning to show far in the west. It was the first wave of the storm.

We rode nearer the strange bubbles. We could see them clearly now. They seemed cracked a bit, as if they had broken. One had a gaping hole in its side. It must have been hollow, just a glassy shell.

Ed and I stopped short at the same time. Or rather our horses did. We were willing, too, but our mounts got the idea just as quickly. It was the smell.

There was a new odor in the air. A sudden one. It had just that instant wafted across our nostrils. It was at first repelling. That's why we stopped. But sniffing it a bit took a little of the repulsion away. It wasn't so very awful.

In fact, it wasn't actually bad. It was hard to describe. Not exactly like anything I've ever smelled before. Vaguely it was acrid, and

vaguely it was dry. Mostly I would say that it smelled like a curious mixture of burning rubber and zinc ointment.

It grew stronger as we sat there, and then it began to die away a bit as a slight breeze moved it on. We both got the impression at the same time that it had come from the broken glass bubble.

We rode on cautiously.

"Maybe the meteors landed in an alkali pool and there's been some chemical reaction going on," I opined to Ed.

"Could be," he said, and we rode nearer.

The black clouds were piling up now in the west, and a faint breeze began to stir. Ed and I dismounted to look into the odd meteors.

"Looks like we better get under cover till it blows over," he remarked.

"We've got a few minutes, I think," I replied. "Besides, by the rise right here is just about the best cover around."

Back at the Weather Station, the temperature was rising steadily and the Chief was getting everything battened down. The storm was coming next, and, meeting the thin edge of the warm-front wedge which was now passing Rock Springs, would create havoc. Then the cold wave might get that far because it was over the Divide. In a few minutes all hell would break loose. The Chief wondered where we were.

We were looking into the hole in the nearest bubble. The things—they must have been the meteors we were looking for—were about twelve feet in diameter and pretty nearly perfect spheres. They were thick-shelled and smooth and very glassy and iridescent and like mother-of-pearl on the inside. They were quite hollow, and we couldn't figure out what they were made of and what they could be. Nothing I had read or learned could explain the things. That they were meteoric in origin I was sure because there was the evidence of the scattered ground and broken rocks about to show the impact. Yet they must have been terrifically strong or something, because, save for the few cracks and the hole in one, they were intact.

Inside, they stank of that rubber-zinc smell. It was powerful. Very powerful.

The stink had obviously come from the bubbles—there was no pool around.

It suddenly occurred to me that we had breathed air of some other world. For if these things were meteoric and the smell had come from the inside, then it was no air of Earth that smelled like burning rubber and zinc ointment. It was the air of somewhere, I don't know where, somewhere out among the endless reaches of the stars. Somewhere out there, out beyond the sun.

Another thought occurred to me.

"Do you think these things could have carried some creatures?" I asked. Ed stared at me a while, bit his lip, looked slowly around. He shrugged his shoulders without saying anything.

"The oddness of the air," I went on, "maybe it was like the air of some other world. Maybe they were trying to make our own air more breathable to them?"

Ed didn't answer that one, either. It didn't require any. And he didn't ask me who I meant by "they."

"And what makes the stink?" Ed finally commented. This time I shrugged.

Around us the smell waxed and waned. As if breezes were playing with a stream of noxious vapor. And yet, I suddenly realized, no breezes were blowing. The air was quite still. But still the smell grew stronger at one moment and weaker at another.

It was as if some creature were moving silently about, leaving no trace of itself save its scent.

"Look!" said Ed suddenly. He pointed to the west. I looked and stared at the sky. The whole west was a mass of seething dark clouds. But it was a curiously arrested mass. There was a sharply defined edge to the area—an edge of blue against which the black clouds piled in vain, and we could see lightning crackle and flash in the storm. Yet no wind reached us, and no thunder, and the sky was serene and blue overhead.

It looked as if the storm had come up against a solid obstacle beyond which it could go no farther. But there was no such obstacle visible.

As a meteorologist I knew that meant there must be a powerful opposing bank of air shielding us. We could not see it, for air is invisible, but it must be there, straining against the cloud blank.

I noticed now that a pressure was growing in my ears. Something was concentrating around this area. We were in for it if the forces of the air ever broke through. Suddenly, the stink welled up powerfully. More so than it had before. It seemed to pass by us and through us and around us. Then, again, it was gone. It almost vanished from everything. We could detect but the faintest traces of it after that passage.

Ed and I rode out to an outcropping of rock. We dismounted. We got well under the rock and we waited. It wouldn't be long before the protecting air bank gave way.

To the south, now, storm clouds materialized, and then finally to the east and north. As I learned later, the cold wave had eddied around us and met the equatorial front at last, and now we were huddled with some inexplicable globes from unknown space and a

bunch of strange stinks and atmosphere, ringed around by. a seething, raging sea of storm. And yet above, the sky was still blue and clear.

We were in the midst of a dead center, in the midst of an inexplicable high pressure area, most of whose air did not originate on Earth, and the powers of the Earth's atmosphere were hurling themselves against us from every direction.

I saw that the area of clear was slowly but surely contracting. A lancing, freezing breeze suddenly enveloped us. A breath rough from the north. But it seemed to become curiously blunted and broken up by countless thrusts of the oddly reeking air. I realized, as the jet of cold air reached my lungs, how different the atmosphere was in this pocket from that we are accustomed to breathe. It was truly alien.

And yet always this strange air seemed to resist the advances of the normal. Another slight breeze, this one wet and warm, came in from the south, and again a whirl of the rubbery-odored wind dispersed it.

Then there came an intolerable moment. A moment of terrific compression and rise, and the black storm clouds tore through in wild streaks overhead and spiderwebbed the sky rapidly into total darkness. The area of peace became narrow, restricted, enclosed by walls of lightning-shot storm.

I got an odd impression then. That we were embattled. That the forces of nature were determined to annihilate and utterly rip apart our little region of invading alien air, that the meteor gases were determined to resist to the last, determined to keep their curious stinks intact!

The lightning flashed and flashed. Endless giant bolts, yet always outside our region. And we heard them only when a lance of cold or hot storm pierced through to us. The alien air clearly would not transmit the sounds; it was standing rigid against the interrupting vibrations!

Ed and I have conferred since then. We both agree that we had the same impressions. That a genuine life-and-death fight was going on. That that pocket of other-worldly air seemed to be consciously fighting to keep itself from being absorbed by the storm, from being diffused to total destruction so that no atom of the unearthly gases could exist save as incredibly rare elements in the total atmosphere of the Earth. It seemed to be trying to maintain its entirety, its identity.

It was in that last period that Ed and I saw the inexplicable things. We saw the things that don't make sense. For we saw part of the clear area suddenly contract as if some of the defending force had been withdrawn, and we saw suddenly one of the glass globes, one of the least cracked, whirl up from the ground and rush into the storm, rush straight up!

It was moving through the clear air without any visible propulsion. We thought then that perhaps a jet of the storm had pierced through to carry it up, as a ball will ride on a jet of water. But no, for the globe hurled itself into the storm, contrary to the direction of the winds, against the forces of the storm.

The globe was trying to break through the ceiling of black to the clear air above. But the constant lightning that flickered around it kept it in our sight. Again and again it darted against the mass of clouds and was hurled wildly and furiously about. For a moment we thought it would force its way out of our sight, and then there was a sudden flash and a sharp snap that even we heard, and a few fragments of glassy stuff came falling down.

I realized suddenly that the storm had actually abated its fury while this strange thing was going on. As if the very elements themselves watched the outcome of the ball's flight. And now the storm raged in again with renewed vigor, as if triumphant.

The area was definitely being forced back. Soon not more than twenty yards separated us from the front, and we could hear the dull, endless rumbling of the thunder. The stink was back again and all around us. Tiny trickles of cold, wet air broke through now and then but were still being lost in the smell.

Then came the last moment. A sort of terrible crescendo in the storm, and the stink finally broke for good. I saw it, and what I saw is inexplicable save for a very fantastic hypothesis which I believe only because I must.

And after that revealing moment the last shreds of the stellar air raveled away. For only a brief instant more the storm raged, an instant in which for the first and last time Ed and I got soaked and hurled around by the wind and rain, and the horses almost broke their tethers. Then it was over.

The dark clouds lifted rapidly. In a few minutes they had incredibly thinned out, there was slight rain, and by the time ten more minutes had passed, the sun was shining, the sky was blue, and things were almost dry. On the northern horizon faint shreds of cloud lingered, but that was all.

Of the meteor globes only a few shards and splinters remained.

I've talked the matter over, as I said, and there is no really acceptable answer to the whole curious business. We know that we don't really know very much about things. As a meteorologist I can tell you that. Why, we've been discussing the weather from cave-man days, and yet it was not more than twenty years ago that the theory of weather fronts was formulated which first allowed really decent predictions. And the theory of fronts, which is what we modern weather people use, has lots of imperfections in it. For instance, we

still don't know anything about the why of things. Why does a storm form at all? We know how it grows, sure, but why did it start, and how?

We don't know. We don't know very much at all. We breathe this air, and it was only in the last century that we first began to find out how many different elements and gases made it up, and we don't know for sure yet.

I think it's possible that living things may exist that are made of gas only. We're protoplasm, you know, but do you know that we're not solid matter—we're liquid? Protoplasm is liquid. Flesh is liquid arranged in suspension in cells of dead substances. And most of us is water, and water is the origin of all life. And water is composed of two common gases, hydrogen and oxygen. And those gases are found everywhere in the universe, astronomers say.

So I say that if the elements of our life can be boiled down to gases, then why can't gases combine as gases and still have the elements of life? Water is always present in the atmosphere as vapor; then why not a life as a sort of water-vapor variant?

I think it makes sense. I think it might smell odd if we accidentally inhaled such a vapor life. Because we could inhale it as we do water vapor. It might smell, say, for example, like burning rubber and zinc ointment.

Because in that last moment when the storm was at its height and the area of unearthly air was compressed to its smallest, I noticed that at one point a definite outline could be seen against the black clouds and. the blue-white glare of the lightning. A section of the smelly air had been sort of trapped and pinned off from the main section. And it had a definite shape under that terrible storm pressure.

I can't say what it was like, because it wasn't exactly like anything save maybe a great amoeba being pushed down against the ground. There were lots of arms and stubby, wiggly things sticking out, and the main mass was squashy and thick. And it flowed along the ground sort of like a snail. It seemed to be writhing and trying to slither away and spread out.

It couldn't, because the storm was hammering at it. And I definitely saw a big black mass, round like a fist, hammer at one section of the thing's base as it tried to spread out.

Then the storm smashed down hard on the odd outline, and it squashed out flat and was gone.

I imagine there were others, and I think that when they aren't being compressed they could have spread out naturally about a hundred yards along the ground and upwards. And I think we have things like that, only of earthly origin, right in the atmosphere now. And I don't think that our breathing and walking and living right

through them means a thing to them at all. But they objected to the invaders from space. They smelled differently, they were different, they must have come from a different sort of planet, a planet cooler than ours, with deserts and vegetation different from our own. And they would have tried to remake our atmosphere into one of their own. And our native air dwellers stopped them.

That's what I think.

THE APPLICATION OF DISCIPLINE, by Jason Andrew

"You are deeply troubled by this, Robert."

Cade unconsciously flinched. He had never learned to feel completely comfortable with Professor Gavin's thought-speech. *"Yes, I am. The treatment that Doctor Mayes has developed could disrupt society and further damage this institution."*

The ancient orangutan wrinkled his massive brow. Professor Gavin paced across the office using a pair of specially made crutches. The movement caused shards of pain to escape the Professor's mental shields. *"I think I'm quite familiar with the dangers of experimental treatments, Robert."*

Cade reflexively boosted his own shielding. "Sir, that is why I am confused as to your stand on this issue."

The Professor snorted derisively. He spoke aloud for the first time since entering the room. "Apologies, Robert. The doctors insist upon these exerizes each day." The resistance training helps keep me mobile. I fear orangutan took another pass of the office. "My discipline is lax this day. I should have waited until later to speak to you."

Cade couldn't help but feel a bit of shame in Professor Gavin's presence. He had been one of the first telepaths allowed to directly communicate with him after the experiment that altered his genetic and skeletal structure. The broadcast waves of pain and anguish had driven three scientists to kill themselves. Cade had managed to calm the simian and teach him to use his abilities to monitor and control his abilities and pain. It had been a traumatic experience for the both of them. There was no point in shielding this.

The orangutan smiled, flipping up his enormous lips. It had taken several years for Cade to fully understand the nuances of simian facial expressions. The Professor knew a secret. "Mr. Cade, do you think I am unable to look past personal regrets to see something that could be good for the entire system?"

"To be honest, Professor Gavin, I'm confused as to why you aren't as worried as I am. Do you see something that I don't?"

Professor Gavin grunted approvingly and tapped the wooden floor with one of his crutches. "I am certain of the outcome because I am aware that you are the opposing council and that you rarely lose such encounters. You won my freedom."

Cade waved away the compliment. "That was different. From your pain waves, it was obvious to anyone listening that you were

sentient. I was merely first to hear them. And now, you are revered through out the system for your work in teleportation." Cade shook his head, frustrated. "The experiment will take education out of our hands. This entire institution will be obsolete."

Professor Gavin grunted softly. He poked Cade with one of his canes. "If you wish to defeat the rather tempting amendment, you will have to think of a better argument. I'm certain that a man with such disciplined mind will come up with a solution. Good day."

The simian professor disappeared with a loud pop. Cade pondered the advice. Professor Gavin rarely made personal visits to his office or anywhere else. His altered bone structure made any travel, except via teleportation, difficult and painful. Translocating your body took an enormous amount of energy and control. It was the mental equivalent of running a marathon with lead weights tied around the ankles. Professor Gavin would not have taken such a journey unannounced unless he had something important to say.

It was not easy for Cade to acknowledge a superior intellect, but he knew that the simian saw things that he did not. Professor Gavin had seen a solution to the problem, but was forbidden ethically from sharing this solution as one of the judges. He ran his body through the standard breathing and mediation techniques until he received a meek thought-call.

"Professor Cade?"

It was Stephanie Williams, one of his ethics students. Cade checked the time and was quite disturbed to discover that he was ten minutes late for his ethics class. If he hurried, class was fifteen minutes away near the athletics field. Arriving late dripping with perspiration was hardly the way to maintain awe amongst the next generation of sentinels. "Inform your classmates that I will be there in a moment."

Translocation teleportation involved a complex combination of farsight and matter rearranging. Most of his students mastered some levels of farsight early in their days at the institute. Matter manipulation was more strenuous. Translocation involved seeing yourself in two places at once. The concept is relatively simple, but the practice required the discipline to allow yourself for one brief moment to be cast into oblivion. It was painful willing your atoms to dissolve, but pain could be overcome with discipline.

Relative time the process felt like an hour. From the student's prospective, only a few seconds passed. He reassembled himself in front of the podium. The students gasped and whispered to each other. Cade smiled warmly, knowing that he had captured their attention and they would pay special attention this session. "Who can tell me why the Augments lost the Earth Unification War? They had superior

firepower and armament."

Several of the students raised their hands eagerly. Cade scanned the crowd looking for his problem pupil. "Ms. Williams, enlighten us."

A number of the students craned their necks to the back of the room where Stephanie was visibly ducking behind the students in front of her. Blushing, she sat straight in her chair. "Professor, the Augments had less numbers and their resources were diminished early in the war."

"A classic textbook answer, Ms. Williams," Cade announced with a bit of disappointment. He glanced around the room taking note of the number of nodding students that agreed with her statement. "It is, however, completely incorrect."

Stephanie waved her arm wildly, hoping to be called upon. Cade nodded, giving her permission. "Professor, the text clearly outlines that as the defining reasons the Augments lost the war."

Cade smiled warmly. Stephanie was one of the top students in her class. He imagined that this class must have frustrated her more than all of the others combined. He had felt the same way as a student here. "I am well aware of what the textbook outlines, Ms. Williams."

Her cheeks burned crimson. She hated it when the Professor decided that the text material was incorrect. "How are we supposed to learn, if the textbook is wrong?"

Stephanie was a thin girl, not yet a woman. Cade could sense her frustration building like a storm. In two years, she would graduate and receive advanced training. As a PSI-10, Stephanie was dangerous. She could melt steel when angered. He waited until she reinforced her mental shields to continue. "You learn by experience and adapting to new circumstances. What is the first principle of power?"

According to her file, Stephanie had somehow slipped through the testing cracks until she accidentally saved her parents during a transit accident. She had to work very hard to catch up with the rest of her class. "The first principle of power is that power without discipline to properly utilize that power is worthless."

"Apply that principle to this historic scenario."

Stephanie thought for a moment or two. "The Augments were given their power via cybernetics. They didn't earn their power and they didn't understand the limits of it. They assumed they would win by the very nature of their power. The non-augments were disciplined and were able to use the proper tactics to disable their superior enemies."

Cade nodded approvingly. Now he understood why Professor Gavin chose that moment to come to him and what he wanted him to learn.

* * * *

The Friday forums were usually sparsely attended. Decades of debate and experimentation had crafted the current curriculum and teaching methods to their present state and radical innovation was becoming increasingly rare. The news of the discovery had brought Professors from across the system to witness the debate. There were so many planned attendees, Professors past and present, that the regular Friday forum had been moved to the Emporium Amphitheater in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

The Emporium Amphitheater was a large white room centered on a small stage. The glass ceiling was curved so that aquatic telepaths could swim comfortably while monitoring the proceedings. Cade had hoped that this matter could be handled quietly, but Doctor Mayes had invited everyone on the voting council to witness his miracle treatment.

As the guests began to filter to their seats, Cade took the podium. “Professors and distinguished alumni, please take your seats. I’d like to say a few words before I introduce Doctor Mayes. First, thank you for attending. This is the largest Friday forum in nearly thirty years. In fact, the last time so many of us were in the same room was the forum that accepted Professor Gavin into our noble ranks. I hope that we show equal wisdom on this day.”

Cade’s words were met with enthusiastic applause. Professor Gavin nodded briskly from his seat. “Second, I’d like to introduce the august Doctor Mayes. Although not a professor at the Institute, he has been consulted several times when students and facility have required assistance. As a student, he passed his finals with honors. Doctor Mayes would like to present to you a new discovery and a proposal.”

The crowd was less generous this time, but still clapped enough to be polite. It was a polite, but weak introduction. Cade had subtly made his feelings on the subject known. Doctor Mayes took the stand. He was tall, husky man with oily black hair tied into a ponytail. “Esteemed colleges, thank you for your warm welcome. I’ve come here with a discovery that can alter the foundations of this fine institution. I’ve discovered a process that combines nanites and a chemical treatment that alters the brain chemistry of a human with a psi-rating resulting in a dramatical increase in the potency of his or her Psi-rating. In addition, this process allows the subject to master difficult tasks in mere moments.”

Doctor Mayes activated the holo-display sharing the critical formula. “This process takes less than three days to complete and then as long as the student continues to take the supplemental pills, their power will be increased exponentially.”

The room erupted into a confused babble of conversations mentally and vocally. Cade slammed his gavel until the room returned to order. “Questions will be answered at the end of the presentation!”

“I discovered the formula quite by accident.” Doctor Mayes smiled with false humility at the assembly. “As a matter of course, I perform many of the autopsies on students at the Institute. There was a training accident three years ago that lead to a cranial combustion.”

Doctor Mayes pushed a couple of buttons upon the podium and skipped to the next holo-slide. A rotating three dimensional display of Annisa May, age 18, flashed before the audience. “Annisa May discovered her abilities at age twelve, which is three years later than most of the human applicants to the Institute. Ms. May had no visible health problems, except for periodic headaches. Such headaches are often quite normal for a developing telepath. Ms. May was quite the athlete and achieved medals in both track and swimming. During a training exercise, she attempted to block a PSI-12 rated mental probe. Ms. May was used to stressing her body during her athletic trials and so pushed beyond her endurance against a superior trainer. The brain aneurism caused her to turn her energies inward.”

With a few clicks of his keypad, Doctor Mayes switched the hologrid to the training tapes. Cade bit his lip and narrowed his eyes. He didn’t need to see the replay of the accident.

* * * *

“Sir, may I ask you a question?”

As a professor, Robert Cade strove to avoid having favorite students. Annisa May was one of the best students of her generation and quite pleasant to teach. “Of course, Ms. May.”

“You served thirty years as a sentinel. Was it worth it?” Annisa asked nerviously.

“Without question,” Cade replied proudly. He sensed her motives in asking this question. “Those years were spent defending the System and helping others. I can’t think of a higher calling.”

Annisa nodded, satisfied. “I’m planning on taking the testing when I turn eighteen next month. I’ve been rated a PSI-8 and I believe I can pass the physical requirements. While it is not required, I’ve been told I have a better chance at making it into the program if I have a mentor.”

Cade was careful to intensify his mental shields to block his feeling of pride. “If I agreed to sign on as your mentor, I’d be putting my own reputation on the line. I’d have to insist that we engage in practice sessions before your testing.”

Annisa's brown eyes widened intensely and she bit her lip to keep from smiling. "Of course, sir."

Cade raised his eyebrow affectionately. "I have time during fourth period, Ms. May. I shall reserve a training room. I expect you there Mondays and Wednesdays during that time."

"Thank you, sir!"

Annisa hugged the Professor. Physical contact was unusual between telepaths as it was more difficult to maintain thought shields. Cade caught glimpses of her excitement, her worry about the future, and her crush for her favorite teacher. Knowing that she had broadcast private thoughts, she blushed. "Excuse me, sir. I have studying before my biology finals."

Cade tried to rememeber when he last felt that excitement.

Annisa arrived at the fourth period training session a minute early. Cade had prepared a safe environment. The walls and floors were matted. He was sitting inside a circle on one end of the room. There was another circle on the other end.

"The first test is the blocking test. I'll attempt to pierce your shields slowly until they break. I've had years of training, so you aren't expected to keep me out. Just try your best."

Annisa sat down into the lotus position in the opposite circle. "Yes, sir!"

The traditional approach to shattering a mind shield is to strike hard and fast like hitting it with a mental sledgehammer. This was a test of Annsia's endurance. He pictured her mental shield like a balloon and instead of popping it with a tack; he began to apply subtle pressure to it.

Across the room, Annisa smiled at the slight mental contact. Slowly, Cade added additional psionic pressure to his attack. Annisa was resisting quiet well, above her last rating even.

"Are you doing well enough to continue, Ms. May?"

Annisa gritted her teeth and nodded.

* * * *

"During the training session with Professor Cade, Annisa ignored the pain in her head. As an athlete, she was used pushing beyond her normal limits," Doctor Mayes explained. Images of her brain flashed on the screens. "As a result, she suffered from an internal brain aneurysm that triggered an acute stroke. This stroke made it difficult for her to stop and caused the accident."

Doctor Mayes pressed a button and the holo-grid displayed the image of Annisa's head exploding. Several of the audience members

gasped. There was a dull telepathic roar across the room. “The inquiry showed that Annisa May had a unique condition, which was unknown to the staff. Professor Cade was vindicated of any negligence.”

Cade mentally strengthened his shield and focused on running his body through breathing exercises. Doctor Mayes changed the display to an examination of Annsia’s brain. “While performing the autopsy, I noticed that certain areas of her frontal lobes were slightly swelled from a typical human. At first, I thought this might be due to the aneurysm, but this area was undamaged. It was a healthy zone surrounded by dead tissue. My theory was that this area might be responsible for psionoic activity in humans. I did a research query for other brains with this phenomenon and almost ninety eight percent of the sample autopsies with these enlarged lobes, that I am calling Mayes Lobes, were graduates from this academy.”

Startled, the assembled guests began to discuss the proposal amongst each other. It took several minutes for Cade to calm the crowd so that Doctor Mayes could continue. “Using a chemical formula and medical nanites, we’ve managed to enlarge these areas in humans with a zero psionic rating. We’ve been able to affect a shift of two to four levels. We believe that this increase will grow exponentially the more powerful the subject is. Further, the nanites allow the subjects to focus their potential and achieve their maximum potential in a matter of days rather than years. My proposal is simple. I wish to give the new students this treatment to advance the cause in science.”

Cade banged the gavel three times to dull the roar. “Chairpeople, do any of you have questions?”

According to the rules of the forum, the Department Chairs were allowed to ask direct questions before the opposing council addressed the forum. Professor Gavin stood, slowly and painfully. He broadcast his thoughts with great potency that somehow remained polite. “I can see how your process could increase potency, but not how it would decrease the learning curve. Please explain.”

“Very well, Professor Gavin,” Doctor Mayes replied, leaving a bit of mockery on the word Professor. “It is theorized that one way that psionics effect the material plane is via the shapes of the brainwaves broadcast. A psionic teaches their body to shape these thoughts. Bio-feedback allows students to practice and learn the hard way. The nanites allow students to learn the same process at an extremely accelerated rate.”

Professor Gavin sat back in his chair and chewed on an apple satisfied. “Any other questions?” Cade asked.

He slammed the gavel three more times. “Very well. My statement shall be short, but to the point. I have no doubt that Doctor

Mayes's treatment can perform as described. However, I believe that such a treatment will leave us with weak and inferior students."

"What? Are you out of your mind, Professor Cade?" Doctor Mayes bellowed.

Cade glanced at the Doctor and smiled. "Not at all Doctor, but I am willing to allow you to change my mind. I challenge you to a duel."

Doctor Mayes opened wide with fear. "Professor, you are ranked at a PSI-12. I am only a PSI-10, I can not possibly defeat you."

"At the present, you are correct. However, according to your own words, you believe that your treatment will allow you to increase your rating at a fanatic rate. I propose the following. This day, you accept treatment of your formula. One week from now, we shall duel. If you win, I shall withdraw my objection. If I win, you will withdraw your proposal and destroy the work."

The audience muttered their approval. Doctor Mayes's face turned red as he bit back a retort. "Of course, Professor, but I can't promise your safety in such a duel."

"Excellent." Cade winked briefly. Everything was falling into place. "Then we shall make it to the death, yes?"

Trapped, Doctor grunted his acceptance. "Professor Gavin, will you serve as legal witness?"

"Of course, my boy. Of course."

* * * *

The Institute buzzed with rumors and predictions about the coming duel. The last sanctioned duel to the death occurred twenty years ago when Professor Gavin first joined as an instructor. Cade noted that his students paid careful attention in his classes, half expecting that this would be his final week.

Cade maintained his usual weekly schedule. His ethics class continued to worry him. Stephanie seemed resistant to his instructions. "Ms. Williams, perhaps you can explain to me exactly what it is that you don't understand."

"You've been teaching us that it is wrong to force others to think as you do, but you are dueling in a few hours? What's the difference if I make someone think better, or you kill them for disagreeing with you," Stephanie asked, feeling bold.

"We are not dueling because we disagree, Stephanie. But I am glad that you brought up the subject," Cade replied. He scanned the thoughts of the room feeling the buzz of their curiosity. "Why do you think that I am opposed to the treatment?"

“You don’t want to be out of a job, sir.”

The class laughed. Cade smiled. “I do have a pension from thirty years service so I imagine I would survive. Further, my field would not be affected. Even augmented psionics would require lessons in ethically using their abilities. Let me ask you another question, do I seem motivated by selfish desires?”

The class laughed again. Cade could have worked in the private sector and made a fortune instead of slaving away for a teacher’s salary. “Very well then, you have your assignment for Monday. Write an essay about why you think I oppose the proposal so much that I am willing to kill over it.”

“What happens if you die?” Stephanie asked.

“Well then, all of you will get full marks for completing your assignment,” Cade answered, gracefully.

“But why are you willing to risk death over this? It doesn’t make sense.”

“You seem awfully certain that I’m going to die, Ms. Williams,” Cade protested with a bit of humor.

“Sir, you can’t beat someone with a rating of two or more above you. It’s just not possible.”

* * * *

Duels were usually held in training rooms, but Cade had insisted that this duel take place at the Friday forum. A protective energy shield was erected to protect the audience from accident harm. Passive and serene, Professor Gavin hovered in a small chair above the stage awaiting the arrival of the combatants.

Doctor Mayes and Cade entered the stage from opposite ends. “Please, Professor Cade, there is no need to die this day. I’ve been rated PSI-14 after the treatment. No one has ever defeated a psionic rated 2 levels higher than themselves. You don’t need to die to make a point.”

Cade smiled, flashing more teeth than usual. He clearly had been spending too much time with the Professor. “Thank you for your concern, Doctor Mayes. However, I feel fairly confident in the outcome.”

Professor Gavin rang a large brass bell. “Duelists should bow.”

Doctor Mayes and Cade bowed to the audience, to Professor Gavin, and then to each other. Satisfied, Professor Gavin rang the bell once more. “Begin!”

Doctor Mayes attacked immediately. His mental probe was fast and potent like a sledgehammer. Cade had expected such a tactic and

had prepared his mental shields. Mayes pressed his advantage sending wave after wave of mental blasts. The attacks were potent and skillful, but they lacked experience. Dripping with sweat, Mayes's face began to turn crimson. "How can this be?"

"Please note that Doctor Mayes is trying with all of his newfound abilities to pierce my mental shield," Cade revealed calmly. He wasn't talking to Mayes, but to the audience.

"I'll smash your shield eventually. You can't hold out forever!"

"I don't need to hold out forever, Doctor Mayes, I merely need to outlast you."

The psychic blasts grew in frequency and potency. Doctor Mayes was panting, trying to keep enough oxygen to his brain. Sensing that his opponent was weakening, Cade switched his tactics to the offensive.

Mayes had concentrated so much upon shattering Cade's defenses; he failed to construct a solid mental shield. Cade's attack was swift, like the trust of a switchblade in an alleyway. Doctor Mayes froze, surprised by the mental punch on the nose. It was a dirty tactic, but Cade didn't have much choice. Taking advantage of the weakness, Cade pummeled through the shield and attacked his nervous centers. Mayes wildly flung his arms over his face. "No! No! This is not possible."

Cade did not reply. He was too busy lobotomizing his opponent. Doctor Mayes dropped to the floor like a slab of meat. Satisfied, Cade bowed to Doctor Gavin and then to the audience.

"The proposal has been defeated," Professor Gavin announced.

* * * *

"I've read through your papers and some of you had curious insights into my motives. Ms. Williams, how did you come to your conclusion?"

Stephanie had been hoping that she would not be called upon. She had been hiding her face with her hair. "I saw the duel, sir. Some of us managed to sneak into the balcony."

"Yes, I sensed you." Cade had been pleased to see his students take such an interest. "But that doesn't answer my question."

"He was more powerful than you. And skilled. But he didn't have the discipline. You beat him using the first principle of power. Power without discipline is useless. Discipline comes from not taking the easy road and working for your abilities. He hadn't developed the stamina to break you. You waited until he was tired to strike."

Cade nodded, proud. There was hope for this student. "Very good,

Ms. Williams. This week we're going to discuss applications of discipline and how to maintain it during times of temptation. I'll know if you haven't read the reading material."

"Very good, my boy," Professor Gavin thought-called. "I've been monitoring your class. All of them will make excellent sentinels, including your trouble maker."

"Thank you, Professor. May I ask you a question?"

Cade sensed curiosity and pride from the orangutan. "Of course, my boy," Professor Gavin

"You knew this would happen, didn't you?"

Chuckling softly, Professor let a bit of pride slip through with his last thought. "Let's just say that I enjoyed watching the first principle of power in action. It was very enlightening."

TOM THE UNIVERSE, by Larry Hodges

I permeate this universe, which I've named Tom, and guard against its destruction. If someone had done that for the universe I came from, then Mary, my sweet Mary, would still be alive, and I wouldn't have killed her and everyone else when I accidentally destroyed that universe.

And now I'm on the verge of destroying much more.

My name is also Tom. I was an undergrad in neuroscience at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore that January in 2040 when I made the discovery that doomed us all. My field of study was cognitive science, the study of human consciousness. What makes us aware of ourselves? Is it just the biomechanical workings of the brain, or something else?

Sherlock Holmes said, "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." I spent countless hours in the lab eliminating the impossible, and there didn't seem to be anything left, improbable or not. The interconnectivity required for human consciousness to exist was just too many levels beyond what was possible. By all rights, we should all be unconscious blobs of matter mechanically going about our business as directed by electronic impulses from the brain, with no more consciousness than a calculator. I suffered brain cramps in the lab trying to figure out what improbables were left.

When I could think of nothing else to try, it was time to relax and let my subconscious figure it out. So I got out the Frisbee and called my lab partners.

Mary, Joey, and I—Tommy, as they called me—called ourselves the "ees." I'd only met Mary when we'd started college, and adored how she laughed when I explained my love for her in neurological terms, with dopamine and neurotransmitters. We did everything together, or so I thought; classes and labs, movies, and late-night bull sessions with pizza and ice cream, usually followed by pints of morning coffee. Our future together was assured; as soon as we graduated, we would get married. I'd even convinced her we should wear purity rings—I had special ones made up with a brain emblem.

Joey and I grew up together on the same street, playing stickball and videogames. He and I were going to be buddies for life.

Professor Wilson, our adviser, reluctantly let the three of us be lab partners even though he said it's best not to put friends together. Amazingly, we got a lot done when we weren't reading the neurology cartoons taped to the walls or playing with Catzilla, the lab's iguana-bodied, cat-brained hybrid mascot. And then came that morning when

we went outside the lab on Charles Street to toss the Frisbee around among the oak trees by the front steps. The fresh air was an escape from the antiseptic stench of the lab.

"You throw like a girl!" Joey said when my toss to him banged against the ground, way off line. He stood half a head taller than me, with that eternal mischievous grin I'd known for twenty years. He was the only person in the world who could get away with a ponytailed bouffant, which I would yank every chance.

"Like a girl, huh?" Mary said, throwing the Frisbee as hard as she could at Joey, who barely blocked it. Mary grabbed the rebound and faked another throw while Joey cringed. "Want some more?" She was my sweet pixie, five feet of tiger and spice, never still, never silent. Recently she'd taken to tying her long blond hair in a ponytail like Joey, giving me a second target to yank. I was the smart one, with a crew cut.

"Okay," Joey said, "you win. You *both* throw like girls!" Mary smacked him with the frisbee again.

As we tossed it around, I became aware of my awareness of the Frisbee's location at any given moment. Somehow my mind tracked this and so many other things. The complexities were staggering. I got so caught up thinking about this that I forgot to be aware of the spinning Frisbee coming at me.

It went *bonk* against my head, and suddenly the answer to my question shook free. Great complexity meant great interconnectivity meant great density meant…it wasn't just improbable, it was astounding. But it was the only thing that wasn't impossible.

The interconnectivity required for human consciousness could only be satisfied by infinite density at a single point. A singularity.

Unless Mr. Holmes was mistaken, every one of us carries a singularity in our head. The mass doesn't register in our universe, or else your body—and everything else for a long way around—would fall into it and squoosh, a quick way to end one's existence. No, the singularity is just a point that floats around, stuck in your brain, presumably created while your brain was being created, with its mass in some alternate universe or state.

Actually, as any physicist could tell you—and I'm not one, I learned this later on—singularities do not really explode, no matter how many times that happens in science fiction stories. All universes start as singularities that expand exponentially, the so-called "Big Bang." There's no explosion, just a single point that gets bigger and bigger until you have a full-sized universe.

"You okay, hot shot?" Mary asked. I realized I was still standing outside the lab, saliva trickling out the corner of my mouth. I wiped it off and re-entered the real world.

“I’ve got something!” I exclaimed, as visions of singularities danced in my head.

“So do I,” she said, hugging me, her red cardigan sweater pressing against me. Oh, if I’d only lost my train of thought and hugged back! I took off for the lab, colliding with three students on the way to the fourth floor. Mary and Joey followed. I ignored Catzilla’s rasping meow as I ran to my lab station to do research and think.

Once I knew about the singularity in my brain, the obvious next step was to experiment on it. But a singularity takes up no space, and is therefore rather hard to test. So I sought the advice of a physics grad student. I didn’t tell him why I needed to expand a singularity, and he didn’t tell me the consequences, thinking it was all just theory talk. He explained what was needed in the foreign language of physics, but I picked up the one part I needed: “Flood it with tachyons, so that the entire quantum evaporation happens in an instant.” I had no idea what the second part meant. It turned out that the physics lab had one of the new tachyon emitters, which he showed off for me. Just what the neurologist ordered!

He assured me that tachyons were harmless, essentially massless —my eyes glazed over when he started talking about “imaginary mass”—and would shoot right through anything at faster than light speeds. I felt in sudden need of a tachyon shower.

Mary and Joey had wandered off, which I thought strange at the time since we were at a key stage of our work, but I didn’t need them for this and so didn’t stop to wonder where they might be. (If I knew then what I knew now….) When no one was looking, I turned the tachyon emitter on full blast, entered the tachyon field chamber through the “*Do Not Enter!*” sign, and the rest is….

I started to say “history,” but of course it was actually the *end* of history. The singularity in my brain expanded like any other “Big Bang,” creating a universe and destroying ours.

Including Mary.

My friend the physics major never said anything about branes. Not brains, but branes, one of those physics terms that I knew nothing about back then. It seems our universe existed inside a brane, which in turn existed in a higher-dimensional space-time continuum, in equilibrium with other universes in their own branes. When the singularity in my head became a universe in its own brane, it knocked our universe and its brane out of equilibrium.

Our universe and its brane happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time, near another brane which it now teetered into. There have probably been countless cases of singularities expanding into universes, but only rarely—as in this case—is a new one so close to another that it knocks the older one out of equilibrium.

What happens when two branes collide? Both of them, and everything inside, are destroyed. And it doesn't take billions of years. Since it all takes place in a higher-dimensional space-time continuum, the collision takes place at all times and spaces simultaneously—as if that word has any meaning in this context—and the entire existence of the universe and its one hundred billion galaxies was wiped out. Not just gone forever, but never existed. The Milky Way Galaxy, Earth, humans, Baltimore, Frisbees, Catzilla, none of it ever happened. Mary who? She never was, no matter how vivid her memory was to me.

The only thing in my old universe that wasn't destroyed was me. My body doesn't exist anymore, and in fact now never existed. But when the singularity expanded from a point to an entire universe in its own brane, my consciousness expanded with it. That's why I permeate this universe, which I named Tom since it all came from me. Every proton, electron, quark, lepton, tachyon, it's all *me*.

But I miss Mary, the rose of my existence. In my human form I had never appreciated her as I did now—and her death, or non-existence, was my fault. *Was there any penalty, any torture, I did not deserve?*

I had actually done far worse, destroying the universe, billions of humans, and—as I soon learned—quadrillions of intelligent aliens scattered throughout the universe. Yet these were just numbers, faceless hordes I'd never meet or miss. With Mary, it was the ultimate betrayal, her life snuffed out by *me*, the one person she should have been able to trust, in the second worst betrayal of trust I would ever know.

Once free of my body, I had the quantum computing power of the entire Tom Universe at my beck and call, and I made use of it. I was a little confused during the Planck epoch (first 10^-43 seconds after the Big Bang), but sometime during the Grand Unification epoch (up to 10^-35 seconds), I figured out what had happened. By the end of the Inflationary epoch (10^-32 seconds), I'd analyzed the previous universe and simulated in my mind all that had ever happened that I cared to see. (Of course, I never knew about these various "epochs" during my previous life.)

Seeing all that I had obliterated in such detail forced me to face what I had done. They were not just numbers or faceless hordes. They were real, intelligent beings, both human and alien ones throughout the universe. Their hopes and dreams not only wouldn't be realized, they no longer ever had hopes and dreams, or even existed. My crimes were almost imagining. It took a hundred years to get past my depression.

But I learned something else in my analysis of my old universe. I

learned what Joey and my sweet Mary had done. That made me forget about all I had destroyed.

I decided there were three things I needed to do, three goals that I would devote my entire being toward achieving.

I actually have very little direct influence over what happens in the Tom Universe. I barely have the horsepower to knock a stray pencil aside without a billion years' notice. I can move tachyons about, but what's the point of that? I'm the weakest of the five forces of nature, the other four being gravity, electro-magnetism, and the strong and weak nuclear forces. I have so little influence over anything with real mass that nobody, not even the Einsteins from both universes, would deduce or detect me. And yet, in cosmological time, I get a lot done.

It took a huge force of will to concentrate on moving things just so, but I did so for billions of years as I influenced the movement of atomic particles this way and that, according to my calculations. It's not easy when you have to constantly recalculate, thanks to the blasted Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, the bane of my existence. I remember how difficult problems used to give me brain cramps; imagine a brain cramp the size of the universe. That's what you get when you spend a few billion years concentrating on one thing. But I got results. Professor Wilson would have been proud.

With my influence over the course of a billion years, matter in one star system coalesced subtley differently than it would have otherwise. Two hunks of rock, a few hundred pounds each, would have missed each other, but with billions of years of focused thought I got them to collide just so. A large chunk of rock broke off one of them, and took off into space, a meteor. (Actually a meteoroid, but I prefer the colloquial term.) The second hunk of rock ricocheted off the first and hit another meteor, knocking off another large chunk of rock. This meteor took off in the same direction as the first one, about a minute behind, just as I'd calculated.

Those two meteors would take care of my second and third goals. But for now, forget about those meteors. They won't be heard from again for ten billion years.

My first goal was the toughest. Mary, sweet Mary, how I missed her! I set about recreating her and my old universe in all its details, right from the beginning. With the quantum computing power of the Tom Universe, I could extrapolate all that had happened, and set about duplicating it.

You can call me God, since I applied whatever light touches were necessary to recreate my old universe. Trust me, galaxy formation is not an easy thing when a ninety-pound weakling at the beach can kick sand at you and all you can kick back with are a few photons. Just to

get the raw materials needed I had to create supernovas, and explode them just right. But a photon here, an electron there, and it adds up if you do it long enough. Soon I had the matter and energy needed, all in the right place at the right time. I created our solar system, Earth, life, evolution, hamsters, and eventually Homo Sapiens, all exactly as it had happened in my old universe.

It wasn't easy affecting evolution since I could barely nudge a strand of DNA. I could move an atom so it affects a molecule, which affects a nucleotide, which affects the DNA. It took many millions of years, and I almost died for want of a galactic-sized aspirin. I had second thoughts about recreating history exactly as before, since that meant Hitler, bubonic plague, cooked spinach, and acne—five years of it for me—but any changes would alter future history, and I couldn't risk that. Once I'd set the initial conditions early in Earth's history, the rest was inevitable, with minor adjustments now and then, thanks to Heisenberg. As to the rest of the universe, I let it evolve on its own, and it ended up pretty close to the original.

Finally the Tom Universe reached TOM, the Time of Mary.

Oh, and me too. I got to watch both of us grow up. With me, it was diaper changing, playing with Joey, bullies stuffing me in lockers, dropping the fly ball to right field that blew the big playoff game—damn, I wanted to change that—then off to college. With Mary, it was diaper changing, ballet classes, middle school queen bee, high school prom queen, boyfriends I didn't know about, then off to college where she finally buckled down and studied. We met, we dated, and then Joey joined us as we formed our lab group.

Joey, Joey, Joey. The things I know about you now!

But now I had Mary back. I couldn't hold her in my arms because I didn't really have arms, unless you count eighteen billion human arms, since they are all part of me. But after 13.7 billion years of planning and execution, her beautiful mind and body existed again. I had achieved my first goal.

I caressed her with the molecules that bounced against her body, as well as from within, since the very matter that made up her body was me. I felt her at every level of existence, the limbular, cellular, molecular, nuclear, and lepton/quarkular. Such sweetness and beauty…

…and such betrayal. There I was, just as before on that fateful day, experimenting on my singularity, unknowingly about to destroy the universe…again. And there, in Dr. Wilson's office nearby, on his sofa, were Mary and Joey, just as before, with their bodies—*made from me!*—entwined, their lips locked. Mary's purity ring lay on a table nearby.

I'd played it out in my mind a trillion times, always with the same

result. Small bursts of cosmic rays spontaneously burst into being throughout the universe as I heaved universal shudders of horror. How could they?

In my youth as a universe, I could never go beyond that moment. What point was there? Mary and Joey betrayed me, and must pay the price.

And yet, as I matured as a universe, my youthful hot-bloodedness was replaced by a more experienced thoughtfulness. It took nearly 13.7 billion years—just a few brief million years before Mary, Joey and I would come into existence again—before I could bring myself to look past the betrayal and calculate what would have happened if I hadn't destroyed the universe. It was just a simulation in my cosmic mind, and yet it seemed almost real to me.

* * * *

"I can't believe we did that," Mary said as she dressed. "Right here, not fifteen feet from the lab."

Joey was silent as he pulled up his pants and put on his socks and shoes. When he was done, he continued staring at his feet.

"We're his best friends, and look what we've done," Mary continued. There was a long silence. Mary stared at her purity ring for a long time before putting it back on. Catzilla stood nearby, staring with accusatory eyes.

"We can't ever tell him," Joey finally said. "It would be too much for him."

"How can we face him?" Tears streamed down Mary's face.

"We won't," Joey said, his face granite.

A week later, Joey transferred to another university, which he claimed focused more on his areas of neurological interest. For several years he maintained occasional email contact with Tom before fading into his past. He never contacted Mary again.

Mary missed a week of school, citing illness. When she returned, she surprised Tom with a candlelit dinner and the finest French food. Thoughts of singularity expansion were put on hold. Later they would work out the theoretical framework for consciousness—including singularities and their part—and their research would revolutionize the field. When Tom wanted to expand a singularity, she convinced him the dangers were too great.

A month after the candlelit dinner, Tom proposed. They married, had three kids, and had fifty happy years together.

* * * *

I replayed over and over in my mind the simulation of what my life would have been like with Mary. The life I'd lost, and the two lives I was about to kill. A cosmic tear rolled down my metaphorical cheek.

For ten billion years, the two meteors had shot through space for their long-planned rendevous, my second and third goals. Now I watched as they approached Earth, just a few million years to go. *What have I done?* My betrayal was far worse than theirs. Mine was the greatest of all possible betrayals.

One of the meteors meant nothing to me; its destination deserved its fate. I focused my will from every corner of the universe on the other meteor as it soared through space. If I could just nudge it to the side, even a few feet….

I could have calculated in an instant if I would be successful, but I did not. If I was going to fail, I didn't want to know, and I didn't want to waste even a snippet of my mental energy on anything except saving Mary. I strained with all my mind, stretching the very fabric of the universe to the limit. If I had enough time, I could move mountains, but I did my best work in billions of years, not millions.

The meteor lurched slightly to the side. Would it be enough? I pushed and pushed, praying feverishly to whatever god there might exist beyond me. I could feel the meteor as it continued to veer off course.

It entered the solar system, still nearly on course. Fear permeated the universe as I watched it draw closer and closer…all I can do now is watch.

The first of the two meteors, now the size of a marble after going through the atmosphere at twenty-six miles per second, comes through the roof. As I'd planned ten billion years before, it strikes my other me, seconds before he/I would start the expansion in the singularity in my brain that would have led to the destruction of the Tom Universe. My head splatters in spectacular fashion, with red flowering out in a contrived Fibonacci pattern of great beauty. I've saved the Tom Universe and all its occupants from myself, my second goal. Billions of humans and quadrillions of intelligent aliens will now continue to exist. I no longer care.

The second meteor is only a minute behind. I'd fought it for millions of years, straining with every fiber of my being, and yet it is only barely off target…would my efforts be enough? I had been too afraid to calculate in advance. I can now see Mary and Joey in Dr. Wilson's office, just as in our original universe, their bodies entwined in ways I would not believe possible if I weren't sensing it with the very matter they use to do it with, their bodies. Joey, my good buddy and friend, is on top, facing Mary, who makes moaning sounds that I'd

heard in my simulations a trillion times before.

A second before the meteor arrives, I see my efforts are for naught. The meteor is off target by only a few inches. My piercing scream shoots through the Tom Universe, unheard by anyone as it echoes through my cosmic mind, rattling constellations throughout my universe on the microcosmic scale.

The second meteor slices through Joey's back and Mary's stomach, leaving behind matching holes the size of Frisbees in their bodies and a trillion times larger in my heart. Catzilla, who's been hiding under a nearby table, scurries from the room in fear. My third goal, revenge, has been achieved.

In desperation I let loose a storm of tachyons toward Mary's head. Since tachyons are essentially massless, I can maneuver them easily. The tachyons flood the singularity in her brain, which begins to expand.

She will live! Embodied in her own universe, just as I am. Just as I had done, she will recreate our universe, and eventually me, and we will be together again…pleasure coarses through my universe.

And then I freeze, my metaphorical jaw dropping. Mary's expanding singularity is not alone. Tachyons have also flooded Joey's brain, and his singularity is also expanding.

I make one last use of the quantum computing power of my universe, and see the horrible truth. Joey's and Mary's universes, now in their own branes, are too close together. Their branes are on a collision course that will destroy both, leaving me alone in universal misery.

"*NO!*" I cry as pain explodes through me. Closer and closer the branes move together for their inevitable rendevous.

I react mindlessly, writhing in agony as my metaphorical muscles convulse. This has little effect on matter, but like corks shooting from bottles, tachyons shoot out everywhere, permeating the very fabric of my universe.

Singularities everywhere begin to expand. Not just the billions inside human brains, but also the quadrillions inside intelligent creatures throughout my universe. Quadrillions of new universes emerge and expand, in close proximity to their neighbors, overloading the uncountable branes. The branes, no longer in equilibrium, collide with each other like dominoes throughout the cosmos. One by one they pop like soap bubbles, until there is nothing, there never has been anything, and just as my existence ends, there is no pain.

WILD SEED, by Carmelo Rafalá

When the bough breaks….

Karlyn ano-Kerr grips the interface around her head with heated disgust. Synapses are breaking down, some are shifting their pulse rhythms, others are stuck in flux; millions upon millions of nanos are running around, clueless, as if zapped by a heavy dose of the stupids.

She can't understand it; the rooting had been flawless, the bio-programmers for Beta habitat integrated without rejection from the aboriginal millifibers and coaxed by their artificial programmers to grow natural habitats, enclosed and self-sufficient. It had been a textbook performance.

Then why is it collapsing, she chides the static-ridden threshold. Why? Why? *Why?!*

Karlyn writhes in her seat in the control bubble of the landing bug and seethes at the decay of her beloved systems-control ganglia. Her program buoy shudders. Algorithms manifest themselves and scatter past her like so many dead leaves on a Veronian wind burst. The leaves brush past her; the massive tangle of information before her strikes a discordant note.

She doesn't need this now. Another failure…

From orbit, Cruz des-Manas is running cross-checks on the System Platform's induction flow and stabilization subroutines. She sees him in the digilandscape distance. He appears as an octopus whose many tentacles flicker about at what looks like a swarm of large black flies. Beta is collapsing in upon itself.

"Systems are shutting down all over," says Cruz. "Keep your eyes open. I suspect a possible leak over to the remaining ground systems."

"My program buoy is sinking," Karlyn whines. Her frustration begins to sting. She had sent out for a pattern trace, but so far no luck. The nanopolice had staggered back, babbling incoherently. She huffs. The surroundings become hazy, as if a sheen of ice has formed over an invisible glass window before her. The effect warps the landscape and things appear milky, distant and unclear.

"Organiform supports are dying," announces Cruz. "Hold on the final coding sequence for the nodules. Karlyn, rig to reboot."

"I know!" She sets up the program again. "No dice," she says. "She's sinkin' fast!"

"Recommend we cut contact with Beta. Avoid possible contamination."

Beta is not the only thing sinking, she thinks, as her stomach hits her lap. Whatever the problem is, she's sure it's her fault.

As she prepares to invoke the nanocrobe buffers to coat and

isolate the undamaged programmers, a lightning crack ruptures the digisky above. Beta Platform, who's garbled double speak has dominated most of her interchannels, howls and discharges a static burst.

With quick efficiency, her biolastic suit's response mode kicks in. A silver screen goes up, catches the burst, amplifies it, and sends it right back at the Platform. There is a shower of blue-white particles, a wrenching noise that threatens to shatter her ears. Suddenly she is thrown clear, and the digivisor on her interface pulls back like melted plastic and withers.

She sits in her organiform chair, head aching, and curses Beta's bloody haemoglobular flow.

"And that, as they say, is that," says Cruz. "I'll check our backups. If this happens again we're gonna have problems growing the colonists."

"Yes, I'm fine, thank you!" she blurts. "Agh!" Her suit is peeling, the heat from the breakdown beginning to burn her skin. She works frantically and manages to pull it off. It crinkles up on the floor and turns from metallic grey to deep black.

"Something must have gotten through to my buoy. My suit has disintegrated."

"Just the overload burst. I'll grow you another."

"'*Just the overload burst*,'" she mimics. "I got fried, Cruz!"

"I know. I can't scan you without an interface suit, though. Check with medical, please."

She sinks back into the chair, careful of her burns. Not exactly the response she's looking for. But then what did she expect? She grunts (*intolerable little shit!*) and wonders what the hell she ever saw in him.

"How's the stock?" she asks. As planet-fall coordinator and biofarmer she needs to know that the colonists for this particular drop are unharmed. It has taken over sixteen stops this time to find a suitable host-planet, one with an eco-system from

which their nanos can grow the living habitats, like the ship grows her a terrestrial body for ground work. Diversity of terrestrial biologicals is not necessary, even a small ecosystem will do.

"Organiform nodules seem undamaged, although I can't get a proper signal from its grid. If we can't verify its authenticity, we'll have to consider the stock contaminated. In which case, as resident biofarmer, I'll need your signature on the liability forms."

Her heart freezes. This is not what she had anticipated. She's never lost stock before. Never. Liability forms? Had it come to this for her already? Why not? She had already felt the slow process of marginalisation creeping about her months ago. "You could be wrong, Cruz."

“And what would you have me do? Start up the sequence? If there is even a slight chance of contamination, bringing them to life could be the cruellest thing we could do.”

“I want a thorough check, and a second opinion. I’m not convinced,” she says.

“Well, luckily you don’t have to be.”

“Wrong,” she replies. “We are in disagreement, and so protocol demands third-party inquest.”

“Just a minute, please—”

“You need me to be in full agreement with you on all and any aspects concerning the possible loss of stock. And I call for direct committee intervention.”

All department heads and their lieutenants sit on the committee. That includes Cruz and herself. But they will both be excluded from the voting process, as they can’t be seen as being unbiased: a conflict of interest in regard to the greater good.

“We both know that will take time. Time we don’t have. Karlyn,” he says in a low and even tone, leaning his round face into the camera, “stop fighting me.” She knows he’s tired of fighting her. He’s always fighting her.

“Already logged and received,” she spits out.

“Great.”

“I’m gonna run a diagnostic,” she insists. “A direct interface with its grid.”

He sighs in resignation. “Knock yourself out.”

“Grow me another suit. I’ll schedule a walk as soon as it is ready.”

“Sure. But first let’s run through the information on Beta’s failure.” Cruz begins rerunning the recorded data. “Funny. It shouldn’t be doing that!” he says to himself.

“Should take about five hours for the suit to be ready. Right?”

Milky ice crystals now form on the bubble as the sun sinks fast, smudging the view, producing an eerie, cloudy-white glow.

“Isolating pattern buffers,” he continues, then mumbles: “It shouldn’t do that!”

“I’ll be down in medical if you need me.”

She looks up through the bubble transparency and notices a group of humanoid aboriginals, squatting in the brush and tall flower-trees nearby. Some fondle with a loving fascination the twisted bits of biohabitat, supports bent in upon themselves, tips blackened, then turn to stroke each others faces with a slow, deliberate caressing, as they always do.

“Sixty percent corruption of Beta’s data,” he continues. “Still might be able to save it.”

A handful of the little hominids are watching her, now.

Childishly, she sticks her tongue out at them.

"Karlyn, isolate the induction flow subroutines. We're gonna need….Always intrigued by bloody mud crawlers….Hey! Do you hear what I'm saying?"

"Clear as ice," she snaps, getting up, and flips her camera the finger.

* * * *

The first sign that something was going down came when Beta's AI Systems Platform developed a flutter in her bioprogramming matrix. Karlyn thought it nothing at first, probably a power surge somewhere that shot through the system. Happens. Cruz had let it pass too, so even he had thought it not worth mentioning. But then it happened four times.

"Don't get too comfortable," says Cruz, voice booming through the bug's speakers. "Find the problem and get back up here."

Karlyn watches the morning sunlight ooze its way through the foliage, like a thick soup. Similarly, her mind oozes through her brain —An after effect of last night's uneven sleep. She can hear the hanging foliage brush against the cloudy transparency in the breeze. A scratching sound, wanting to get in.

"If you think you can do it better, Cruz," she replies, closing the last seal on her new biolastic suit, wincing, as her skin is still a bit raw, "by all means, feel free to join me."

"No thanks. Terrestrial mud crawling is not my idea of a good time. The stench, the filth, bad working conditions, nah!"

This place isn't the only thing that stinks, she thinks sourly as she rubs her eyes, attempting to wipe away the dream that follows her from the bed in medical. In the dream she was in a deep forest, surrounded by flowers, pollen gliding through the air rich in golden sun rays. Nice fairy tale image. Sniffing a bloom, the flower's petals closed around her face, fine tentacles rushed down her throat. She felt like her insides were being ripped out. She awoke with a start, her body burning, throbbing.

She brushes the vision aside and now gets herself a cup of vitajuice from the service kitchen and proceeds to stalk through the empty lower deck to the equipment locker, her bones feeling heavy, her skin tough. It seems like only yesterday that she had been enjoying the ease of one-third gravity in the bioring ship, before climbing into the reconstruction couch and going into stasis to wake up here. Wherever *here* is….

She touches a panel and the locker door melts away. She stares at

the untidy shelves.

….and to wake up here with him. With *him*. It never stops surprising her that she had renewed her work contract. Especially when he had been made supervisor of her beloved farming program. Four hundred years of seeding experience and that asshole gets the big chair. She rolls her eyes in disgust. Committee politics, and he was good at playing the game, his new squeeze toy being the assistant chairperson. Her stomach twists with that thought.

Farming has been her life. Now, would he dare threaten to take that, too?

She considers the pulse gun, hanging in its display.

Karlyn had renewed her registration of monogamy too, despite the demise of their affair. She had discovered later that he had never registered as monogamous when they were together. By rights he didn't have too, but he should have informed her out of courtesy at least. Instead, he had let her heart accumulate unfair romantic notions, notions of unity and familial obligations, setting down roots, notions he had no intention of entertaining.

"This is who I am," he had said, after she pleaded for him to reconsider their relationship. "Didn't you know?"

She folded her arms across her chest. "You needed me," she said accusingly. "To get on the committee."

"Karlyn…."

"We never had a chance, did we? Did it mean anything to you? Did I?"

He spoke slowly. "It all means something to me."

She kept to herself for a few weeks, taking time off from her duties. When she returned, six months later, she learned that he had been promoted. So what was she to him, then? Another one of his many partners, for sure. Most likely a stepping-stone, she had concluded. And he had left quite a footprint on her back.

And it had all gone downhill from there. And in her self-imposed social solitude, regressive feelings of anger and dejection, spawned from the depths of her wounded heart, began to bubble.

She frowns at the ceiling. "Where's your dedication to the stock?"

"Whose stock? Theirs or ours?"

"Funny. I remember learning that there really isn't much of a difference."

He makes a guttural sound in his throat. "Huddling together in the slime like slugs."

"Maybe mud dwellers like the sense of being grounded to something. Belonging."

"Belonging to what?"

"Oh, I don't know. To each other."

“Let ’em. We’re the flowers of the wide open spaces, my dear.”

“Wrong analogy,” she corrects him, digging through her mess for the equipment, ignoring the weapon on the shelf. “Try bees. Going from stem to stem. No,” she says to herself aloud. “Bees have a deep communal system. Wind bursts. Carrying wild new seed to unknown grounds. That might be the type of prosaic, expressive crap you’re looking for.”

He sniffs. “You stay down there any longer and I might recommend you for psychological re-adaptation sessions.”

It wouldn’t be the first time. Farmers have the usual interview session after every ground assignment. The shock and discomfort of being grounded does involve variations of disorientation and discomfort when adapting to a harsh gravity well, discomfort that can inhibit the usual motor coordination in conjunction with the ability to concentrate, to find her core.

She fumbles getting to the control bubble. She can hear the leg brace machinations purring. The ice crystals melt away in the morning’s quick and heavy heat. The distant images wriggle in the melting frost and warp into their proper shapes.

Cruz is still chattering in the background, his voice grating on her ears.

“Yeah, well, thanks for the chit-chat,” she blurts.

“Sure, but remember to wash when you’re done.”

“I’m laughing,” she says, flatly.

“Glad I could lighten your day. See you on the uplift.” The speakers snap off.

She tries to clear her mind as she heads for the antechamber, a hand running absently over her thigh as the muscles work their strange power.

* * * *

We interrupt this program….

Karlyn slashes her way through the foliage, her sonic blade perfectly slicing the stalks of thin young trees in half. The humidity hangs in the air like slowly moving vapor clouds. Her digivisor works to keep her faceplate clear as she hacks her way to the clearing and the organiform nodules. Following close behind, as expected, come a swarm of aboriginals, dodging through the thick growth with ease.

She stops, teasing them, and they all stop, holding frozen their positions as if suddenly encased in ice. She moves suddenly, then stops. They do the same. She plays this little game with them for some time.

The curious little hominids had shown up the morning after landing, touching the bug, caressing, as if feeling its every living millifiber. When they had first arrived, her initial survey failed to report on other land creatures other than Species One, the “gelatins” (small, soft squirming creatures less than twenty centimeters long that lived high up in the flower-trees, either lain in the flower buds or placed there after birth, seemingly unattended, evidently being fed by them). As the seasons changed, she discovered that Species One was in fact an infant stage of Species Two. After completing their gestation externally, they then venture down to the soil for good.

She had spent some time observing them. She had sat with them, followed them, examined as best she could their close-knit, communal relationships. They appeared non-progressive as there was nothing of unnatural construction around, their villages being close groupings of flower-trees and large-leafed bushes that hung in an umbrella shape and provided shelter, as if the vegetation grew to accommodate them. When they slept, she used a nano probe to examine their genetic history, the history of a species unaltered in a billion years. An evolutionary dead end; she had concluded that it was safe to proceed with the seeding.

She bounces over fallen trees, dodges bushes, stops, zig-zags through the growth. Her playful audience is not far behind, imitating, simulating, like a group of over-excited preschool children at playtime.

She makes the clearing and stops to catch her breath. The hominids freeze where they are, looking as if they could go on like this for an hour or so, unfazed.

She feels something’s wrong. She looks up.

“Shit on me!”

The Beta habitat, or something resembling it, has sprung up during the night like a wild grouping of jungle vines, twisted and interlocking. Filaments resembling veins wander out across the smooth areas of lattices and giant cylindrical leafy enclosures.

“Shit….on….me,” she whispers, and quickly switches channels over to Beta. Although it is mumbling incoherently the Platform’s biosystems check out five-by-five down the line.

Her interface chimes.

Before she knew what she was doing, she was standing at the habitat, hand outstretched, rubbing the smooth lattices and snaking branches. At the centre sit the nodules in their mouldings, undisturbed. The aboriginals follow close behind, but avoid getting too close to the structure. They seem content to sit off at the clearing’s edge and watch her.

Her interface clangs.

She has never seen anything like it. Although mutations do occur to a small degree (all dependent on the differences in each planet's particular biology) the sequencers have fail-safe coding to prevent extensive mutations; coding that behaves like dominant genes, intent on preventing any large scale rewriting.

But something broke through. Suddenly she is overwhelmed with fear, the fear of failure. She needs to check the nodules.

Her interface rattles for her attention. She tries to ignore it. His voice from earlier in the day is still echoing in the back of her head. Irritation threatens to multiply with each rattle.

Not now!

She sends the call to her answering service.

* * * *

She has been plugged into the drop-grid for no more than five minutes when the short, leathery skinned aboriginals suddenly come swarming over to her, poking their heads around at her, hands probing her body with their little, spidery fingers, pulling at her. One bangs on her helmet, another begins tugging at her breast pocket. She brushes the little mud crawlers aside and continues working. The "inside" of the grid looks a bit….well….intoxicated.

She picks up a nodule from the moulding and examines it for a second time. And for a second time an aboriginal who had been sitting nearby quietly reaches for her and grips her wrists, softly but firmly, while another takes the nodule from her and places it back in the mould. The hominid lets her go and turns away, again.

She watches this lone alien now as it returns to its rocky perch to sit and watch, a solemn look to its brown face. Its small black eyes search her face with a kind of questioning sadness.

What? she wants to ask it. You don't want me to touch the nodule? Is that it? You don't understand why I touch it? Or is it something else?

They seem to grow bored now and move off a distance to touch each other, encompass each other in their long, skeletal arms, locking in full embrace. Sensory communication? Or simply overly affectionate? She had never been able to establish whether they possessed a true, structured language system. But they did seem to be communicating with each other.

She watches them now. She wishes for communication, the right kind, the soft kind, gentle and soothing, hands moving, skin on skin, motion and rhythm….

She closes her eyes, but cannot picture it. Not anymore. She opens

her eyes, disheartened.

A group of youths have shaped a giant maroon-coloured leaf into a bowl, and catch the water dripping off the trees in the humidity. They hand it back and forth between one another. She knew that if she drank some, it would taste sweet.

* * * *

"Just where the hell have you been?"

Karlyn tries several routes in order to reach the main template without success, the nanopolice bounce back at her without any reasonable explanation. Her frustration mounts.

"I've been busy," she says and sighs, looking up at the towering structure before her.

"Busy," he mumbles. Then says: "Well, about an hour ago I started receiving a strange pulsing over Beta channel. Thing just came back online. All of a sudden. Just like that!"

"I know. I'm looking right at it."

"Looking at what?"

"The habitat. It's up and running. Although she's deformed somewhat."

"Are you shitting me?"

She adjusts her biolastic suit's camera eye. "See that?"

He whistles.

"Try boosting the bandwidth," she says. "You should be getting a pulsing sound. I'm attempting to hack into the nodules. So far, no luck."

Cruz is stunned; she knows this because for the first time since she could remember he has little or nothing to say.

"Damn it! Damn it, damn it, damn it all!" she shrieks.

"What now?"

"The buffers on the grid just melted," she huffs, millifibers untwisting, silicrobes breaking apart and floating away. "There's no way to tell if the coding sequence has been affected unless we activate it."

"Gee, do you think?" Cruz remarks. "I've been saying that the moment Beta went down. And that hiccup earlier? I've traced the source and it's not in the system. It's from outside."

She scoffs. "Nothing can get in from outside! That's what the filters are for."

"It can if its own coding comes across as a latent paragene, waiting for instructions," he says flatly. "One of the most extreme probabilities, which is probably why we—why you—missed it."

Here we go! She puts her fists up and bangs her own helmet several times. *Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!* It was such a remote danger she'd never had the biofilters check for such a problem.

You've been waiting for something like this to happen. Haven't you? she thought. Little man.

"So what's that, like, a point-two percent probability?" She sits back on her thighs.

"Something like that," says Cruz. "Well, it gets better. Every time we booted up to restart, the induction flow flushed the system, and the resulting surge multiplied the paragenes by a factor of three."

"So we inadvertently caused the codes to multiply," she says lamely. "Certainly explains a few things, anyway."

"Like?"

"Platforms themselves are sentient. We know that Beta was contaminated during primary build-up to sentience after landing. While I was poking around in the matrix, I could have….well….I thought…."

"You thought what?"

"Well, I could have sworn the thing giggled!"

"Uh-huh," says Cruz. "Well in the meantime we need to figure out what exactly is in those pseudo-paragenes. And Karlyn…."

Her skin flushes cold, knowingly. "What?"

"We'll have to destroy the stock. I'll need that signature, Karlyn."

She shakes slightly. "I don't concur."

"You called a third-party inquest. It's no longer your decision."

Her heart sinks into her stomach. She sees another error made.

You give that little bitch a good one last night? Made it special, so to finish what you started? Trying to go all the way up the ranks, Cruz? Need me out of the way, first? My vote, which always counts against you? You emptied my life, my career. You want my committee seat empty, too? This might do it for you. Glad I could help.

"You hear? It's not your decision."

She stares at her idle hands, at her trembling fingers, impassively, trapped. Her voice wanders absently from her lips: "I wonder whose, then?"

She watches the little creatures spin around and begin dipping into the forest, disappearing one by one. She watches them go. The solemn one sits for a moment before getting up. It turns to face her and, before vanishing into the dense growth, sticks its tongue out.

* * * *

And now a word from our sponsors….

The aboriginals are busy gathering water and food, the soft fruits that hang low on the dripping trees. They pass the water bowls and food back down a line toward the larger group that lay huddled with the coming darkness under an umbrella tree, touching each others' faces softly while working. The solemn one sits off a ways by the nodules where she had been working for some time, like a solitary watchman.

Cruz has had no luck deciphering any biosequencing the paragenes might contain. The elusive alien life codes that they harbour remain shrouded in confusion. And with the stock's authenticity in question, the committee has made its decision.

"That's funny. My interface is having trouble linking with Beta," Cruz says. "I can't hear her biorhythms."

"Oh?" she whispers to herself.

"Have you downloaded the toxin into the Platform?"

"Yes," she lies. "Yes, I have."

The mouldings have burst into small flower-trees; nodules nested carefully among the large pink petals, waiting for the final coding sequence that would let them begin their new life.

At least they'd have a fair chance, fairer than any stellar dweller could hope, of that she is certain. Roots. Roots from which to grow….

The bug's primer chimes, signalling the craft's readiness for launch. She waits at the hatch, her eyes swallowing the final picture as hard as they could. Gripping the interface controls around her helmet she logs on and links to Beta's digilandscape. The induction flow appears stable, despite the strange whooping sound it makes. The program buoy holds.

This will be her last action as a farmer. With a strange calmness, she keys in the final coding sequence from her wrist pad. She strains to hear the biomatrix flutter and hum in her earpiece. At first the algorithms scatter, then twirl like a cyclone. Piece by piece they fall into place, creating a new, yet familiar landscape.

With the system fully automated, she disengages the link.

"I can't get a reading," Cruz says. "Termination complete?"

"Oh yes," she says. "Yes it is."

Over the distance the solemn one's voice booms a deep-throated tune, thick in the air. This is the first time she's ever heard anything like this spring forth from their alien mouths. She finds something alluring about the song, something rich with deep, yet obscured meaning. She thinks to hit the recorder, but for no reason known to her she doesn't move. Maybe it doesn't seem important in the greater scheme of things.

I wish you well. Whoever you are. Whoever, whatever you might become. You, who are rooted and set in your lives to come….

She palms the wall panel. The hatch closes like a flower at sunset. She returns her suit and equipment to the locker, folding it neatly, placing the devices correctly in their holding slots, directly beneath that fully loaded pulse gun. She strokes its transparent sheath; a finger tracing the weapon's every curve, eyes locked on the trigger. She grips the gun's handle firmly…

"Countdown begun. Twenty minute ETA," Cruz remarks. "See you soon."

"Yeah," she says, placing the cold weapon in her belt and covering it with her shirt. "See you *real* soon."

As night falls hard the condensation on the bubble begins to crystallize. The view becomes hazy, discordant, and her heart feels a strange release, an unwanted wave of contentment filling the void once there.

"System nominal," says Cruz. "Run a diagnostic on—"

And although I know you will not, could not, ever hope to know me, remember me. I, in my envy, shall remember you.

Cruz's voice cracks over the speakers. "Do you hear what I'm saying?"

"Clear as ice," she says, distantly. "Clear as ice."

TABULA RASA, by Ray Cluley

I met Jo in a bookshop, I remember that much. I've always thought it an excellent place to meet the woman I fell in love with. Neither of my previous girlfriends had liked to read much and so our relationships didn't last long. What can you talk about if not books? I'd picked up an Austen and was browsing through its pages, looking for annotations, when she spoke to me.

"Oh, I love that one. I can't believe he dumps her."

I looked up and there she was, somehow resplendent in a hoody and jeans: Joanne. She was beautiful, and something of my reaction to that must have shown, although she misinterpreted it.

"Oh God. You've not read it."

I was able to recover by then. "I don't think so."

"Seen the movie?"

"Nope."

"And now I've ruined it for you. I'm so sorry."

I was in love. The smooth-talking type would have said, "Have dinner with me and all's forgiven." I said, "No problem."

"Forget I said it."

"Good idea. I'll sell the memory."

"Yeah, right, who'd buy a 'spoiled book' memory?"

Looking at the person who'd spoiled it, I figured just about anyone with a sexual interest in women.

"You'd be surprised what people buy," I said instead.

"Not really. I work in a charity shop. Sold a painting of a goldfish this morning. Watercolour, naturally." And she smiled.

That's how we met.

* * * *

I wasn't joking about the memory selling thing, I really do work for Lucid. Yeah, it's hard to get on their books, but sell something big and they keep you on for the little stuff. To get through uni I sold something big. Obviously I'm not sure what, but I strongly suspect it was winning a regional swim because I have the trophy at home with my name on. After that I made a little extra reading classic literature and selling the experience on; it's popular with students. Twain said a classic is something everyone wants to have read but nobody wants to read, and it seems he was right. I have well thumbed copies of Dickens, Joyce, and funnily enough some Twain. That year was Austen. Shakespeare's popular as well, of course. Pays more, too.

But that was just a little extra to tide me over. For a proper job, when I met Jo, I worked at the university where I used to study. After my degree I couldn't find anywhere to use it, so I taught others how to get my degree. Not very different from what I do for Lucid, really.

Jo, she volunteered at a charity place but she also worked as a florist. She'd come home smelling like camellia and carnations and forget-me-nots and I'd take deep breaths of her hair to get the scent that was hers.

"Weirdo," she'd say, but she said it smiling and she always kissed me afterwards.

When Jo moved in we celebrated with takeout pizza and bottles of beer. She folds her pizza pieces before eating them so nothing falls off and I love her for it. One of her funny little ways.

"When are you going to read something good?" She was picking mushrooms out of the box. They must have fallen from one of my pieces.

"I always read something good."

"You always read the *same* something good. Try Chandler or Christie or Crais for a change."

"No one buys crime fiction. Those who want it, read it themselves. To work it out."

"That's what I'm saying, read it for you."

"Novel idea," I said, and drank to my own pun.

She slapped my arm. "You used to read all the time."

"I still do."

"*Sense and Sensibility* again? Law books? The fucking Highway Code?"

The truth was, money was tight and we needed the extra from Lucid. With Jo moved in, things would get easier. Then I'd read again. I told her this.

"Fine. But the first thing I'm buying, my contribution to the place, is a proper bookshelf."

I looked to where we had boards stacked on blocks, each curving under the heavy load of books. "What about living the cliché?"

That earned me another same slap to the arm but with a bit of tickling afterwards and then we were rolling around amidst empty beer bottles and boxes full of her things waiting to be unpacked.

Good memories.

* * * *

"What would we do if I was pregnant?"

We were in bed, having just made love for the second time that

lazy Sunday, and without missing a beat I said, “Well obviously I’d want a paternity test.”

She straddled me with a mock cry of outrage and before long we were at it for a third time.

* * * *

I sold my first memory of us when the boiler went. After nearly two weeks of our breath clouding the air, I went to Lucid and sold the time we went to the park for a picnic. We’d said “I love you” by then, but so recently that everything else we said was still a sense-heightened echo of it. Hands that touched when reaching for paper plates held a charge between them, and lips that kissed tasted for stories yet to be shared. We made shapes out of the clouds like you’d expect, fed the ducks like we were supposed to, and everything felt like we were the only ones who were ever really in love.

That’s what her diary tells me anyway.

Later, when I sold them the memory of our first holiday, it was because I thought Jo was pregnant. She wasn’t. But she was furious.

“Why would you sell that? It was personal!”

“All memories are.”

(Yeah, I know; it was pathetic.)

“But Greece! Our first holiday? Come *on*. We went snorkelling, took that cruise around the island—”

“We have pictures.”

“—had sex in the fucking surf. Pictures?”

“Well not of that.”

“Jesus. And now someone else has those memories. Some emotional retard loser who can’t get a girlfriend remembers fucking me in the sea and drinking cocktails every night.”

I wanted to tell her it doesn’t work that way, but she knew. She was just angry. They don’t give the memory whole, they can’t. When you buy a memory you buy the sensations of recall, the feelings, the *emotional* experience. Think back to a memory of your own; it’s hazy, right? Sense impressions and big gaps, a spliced movie reel of images. Well with Lucid there are no images except the ones they give you after some tinkering, and maybe there’s some token souvenirs they rustle up for an extra cost. I also wanted to tell her that if we drank cocktails every night I was surprised she could remember much of it herself.

“I thought we were having a baby,” I said. “I thought we’d need the money. I teach. You arrange flowers into pretty patterns and sell junk to help old people. We’re not exactly swimming in cash right

now."

"We swam in the Med, but of course you wouldn't remember that."

"Actually, we've been to Turkey, too. I remember the Med."

"Twat," she said, and threw my Rubik's Cube at me. I ducked and it smashed against the wall. I didn't care. I could never do the fucking thing.

We weren't having a baby, so I took her back to Greece with the money. We had a great time, fixed things, made love to repair what we had. Made new memories. On a balcony eating salad and feta cheese we decided Jo would go on the pill. Just for a while.

* * * *

We had a lot of good times. I know because I still have the receipts. We were in love, and people always want that. It's in demand, you could say, and it's a seller's market. For every roll around in a tangle of bed sheets, every romantic dinner, every walk along the beach I do remember, I'm sure I've sold just as many. I was careful, though. Or thought I was, anyway.

At first the extra money was great. We were able to do more things together, enjoy ourselves, snuggle deeper into our love as we decorated the flat, ate out, saw the newest films and pulled them apart over drinks in cosy bars. The more things we did, the more I could sell one or two of them so we could have more. But it wasn't long before it started to show. Jo would make jokes I didn't understand or I'd ask questions I should've known the answers to, things like that. Once, as she stripped off her shirt for another bout in the bedroom, I noticed she had a tattoo hooked around her belly-button, a curl of ivy with little green hearts for leaves. It freaked me out a bit, that one, because I didn't know she had it. Luckily her shirt was up over her head at the time, caught on her ponytail, and she didn't see my surprise. I helped her undress with a shaky laugh and we rolled around together. I kissed her tattoo a lot and as she traced patterns on the back of my shoulder I realised I had one too.

But on the whole, things were good.

* * * *

Lucid Ltd is a large building, new and expensive but otherwise modest about its identity. There are no signs outside except for an engraved panel of glass. Inside it's all thick carpet and huge

photographs of weddings, newborns, children on swings, graduations, acceptance speeches, other stuff. The pair on the front desk wear their smiles like it's part of the uniform, but I know from experience they're nice enough really. If they still have the same staff there.

The man on the front desk was called David and he told me they couldn't divulge the sort of information I required. I offered him money, but they must give the desk staff training or something because he turned it down. And it was a lot.

"Please. I need to remember."

"Sales are non-returnable," he said. "Come on, you know this."

I was a regular by then. I no longer got the "sir" treatment.

The woman he shared the desk with was looking on with interest. She was new. I should have tried her.

"Jenny, can you go and tell Martin to come to the front please?"

Her eyes widened just a little and she picked up the phone. Martin was security.

"No, go get him personally. It'll hurry him up."

She nodded obediently and went. David took the cash I still held out and pocketed it quickly.

"I'll email you," he said. "And you'll delete it immediately afterwards, ok?"

I nodded. Delete it. I could do that.

* * * *

Jo and I ate the rest of our meal in silence. I'd reminisced about the time we ate here last, me relishing every mouthful of rainbow trout and she nearing orgasm with every forkful of truffle-topped risotto.

"What did I look like?" she asked eventually, dabbing at her mouth with a napkin. She never dabbed at her mouth with a napkin. She put her hands flat on the table and looked at me. "Did I have red hair, maybe? Blonde? Blue eyes? Maybe I had bigger tits."

"What are you talking about?"

I was pretty sure she hadn't changed her hair in a while, and I was certain she hadn't had any surgery. Whatever the trap was, I was missing it.

"The girl you came here with last time, what did she look like?" She smiled, but it was her quick one, sharp like a paper cut. "When *we* came, you and *me*, for our *anniversary*, the place was a sushi bar."

I had no reply. I didn't need to explain.

"You said you wouldn't go there anymore. You *promised* me no more Lucid. We're doing fine now. We don't need the money."

“I promised I wouldn’t *sell* anything else.” I sounded whiny even to me. “I bought something this time. I bought back our anniversary but they must have tinkered with it, changed some things.”

“No shit.”

That was when the waiter turned up to ask if everything was alright. He meant with our meal. We both told him yes, and Jo ordered dessert as if nothing had happened in that way women can do. As soon as he was gone she was back in combat mode.

“They ‘tinkered’ with it so the dick who bought it wouldn’t see me in the street and say hi.”

I tried to speak but she held up a finger and continued, anticipating my comeback.

“No doubt they tinkered *me* back in for you. What did you do, take them a photo? And they must have tinkered the food too, or not tinkered it, or whatever, because I *fuck*ing. *Hate*. Risotto.”

She pushed away from the table and left.

I ate her sorbet when it came and paid the bill. The sorbet tasted of frozen nothing.

* * * *

I stopped selling anything to Lucid for a while then, except for the occasional *Great Expectations*. We got back to normal again, and eventually normal wasn’t bickering and making up; normal was only good stuff. We visited family, that’s how serious we were, and one day in January, when the air was so crisp it hurt your nose to breathe it and the sky was such a frosted blue you thought it would break if you could throw a rock high enough, I proposed. We’d moved from our dingy flat above the pet shop to a rented house that had cycle routes into the country. We’d pedalled our way through leafless woods and over tiny streams that crackled their ice beneath our wheels and when we stopped at a kissing gate I refused to let her pass until she’d said yes. I’m not making any of this up or reading it from her diary. I remember. It hurts the same way the wind did as it bit our hands and faces going downhill. We sped our way down to the nearest pub and celebrated our engagement with mulled wine and a ploughman’s lunch, of all things.

I still have the ring. Lucid offered me a lot of money for it when I sold the wedding day, but I told them they’d have to make do with just the one. It’s engraved, anyway. *The best of times, the worst of times*. She likes Dickens. I kept the memory of buying it, too, because the woman in the shop had said “If it makes her as happy to wear it as it’s making you to look at it, you’ll be fine.”

I like to remember that and imagine it's true.

* * * *

There was a case in the papers, you might remember it, about a young woman who breezed through her exams two years early because she'd bought memories from her lecturer. That lecturer was me. It wasn't the first time I'd done it, but it was the one that got me fired. The little bitch sold the story to the papers herself to recoup the money she'd spent at Lucid. The university couldn't fire me for the memory thing, it's not illegal (though my case forced a few revisions there, I think), but they *could* fire me for being under qualified, which they decided I was after I failed an exam of my own.

Jo wasn't angry. She was upset and cried a lot (which was worse) but she wasn't angry. I'd started selling my education because I wanted to keep everything that was ours, but I needed to sell something because by then she *was* pregnant. Our darling little Daniel. Oh, Danny boy. So, so beautiful.

We moved closer to her family after the scandal. With me looking for work, and a baby on the way, we needed their support more than I liked to admit, and she needed them in ways I used to be good enough for. I got a job in a warehouse. There was no need to promise not to go to Lucid because Lucid had made a show of firing me too. But that's all it was; a show. I was kept on as a sort of thank you for the publicity. You know, just so we could pay the bills.

By the time Danny was born we never talked about the good times anymore, so I sold a few.

* * * *

We got married before Danny was born. Neither of us were religious, and our families didn't push for it, but we wanted it done before raising a family of our own. I often wonder if Jo knew back then that I'd eventually sell the day and so did me the courtesy of keeping Danny out of the picture. Maybe it just turned out that way. He would have been barely a bump back then.

I'll never sell my memories of him. Not ever.

* * * *

There are still some things I haven't forgotten. I remember the

day we met. I remember Jo asking me to move in, and then us deciding she'd be better at mine then getting the most drunk we'd ever been. We ended up singing karaoke in a gay bar somehow. I remember her hiding her *Sex and the City* DVDs for the first three months we lived together. I remember the time she laughed so hard she wet herself because of the way I looked in scuba gear. I remember the way she shudders if kissed on the back of the neck during sex, and I remember the way she sings in the morning after an all-nighter. I remember her at the kissing gate, sobbing so hard she had to say "yes" three times before I heard her, and I remember the way the ground felt under my knee, and the way we kissed against the fence, and the bikes toppling over, and the way we cycled to the pub so fast that our faces were red with cold, and I remember grinning so hard for so long that my cheeks actually hurt for a while after.

She's remarried now.

* * * *

When divorce looked like a possibility I went to my guy at Lucid and tried to buy back everything I'd ever sold about Jo. I got a few of them. Some people I couldn't find, whereas others wouldn't believe the memories were mine in the first place. One man even got violent and broke my nose. I broke his. I was cautioned by the police.

When divorce was *discussed*, I thought about forcing the names I'd been given to sell back what was mine. I fantasised abductions and drugged cooperation and wondered how much a Lucid employee would need to extract a memory by force. But they were only daydreams. I stole Jo's diary instead and tried to recall firsthand the things she'd written. She found me reading it and used it as the final straw.

We split up, divided our things, and arranged custody and visitations.

I got to keep the diary.

* * * *

At 19.37 on Tuesday the 25th of March I kidnapped James McVey from a supermarket car park. I forced him into my vehicle at knifepoint and instructed him to drive us to a remote location where I held him captive and threatened him with violence for two hours. I only released him when the recollection provider—Lucid Ltd—notified authorities after I attempted to bribe an employee to perform an

illegal transfer. I was arrested and James was returned home to his family who were described as “relieved and thankful.”

The newspapers tell me all of this.

Charges were dropped provided I sought psychiatric help, though a restraining order was put in place. I’m not allowed within a thousand feet of Mr McVey or his family due to a history of violence and the broken nose to prove it.

His family?

The papers can only speculate as to my motives, but they’re more than happy to do so. Theirs is a feasible story. I don’t know for sure because I sold the kidnap (like I said, you’d be surprised what people will buy), but considering James McVey is Jo’s new husband, it seems likely I wanted at least a few of his memories.

He sees my son more than I do.

* * * *

I’m a newsagent now, selling papers that printed me on their front pages once upon a time. That’s how I saw Danny this morning; he came in for sweets. I watched him walk slowly up the rows of confectionary, choosing carefully just like I do with books. He took so long deciding that his mother had to come in and hurry him up. She looked good, dressed smart in a skirt and jacket. I wonder if she still carries a tangle of hearts beneath it all.

“Come on, Danny boy, your father’s waiting.”

For a foolish moment I’d thought she meant me. All my breath escaped in a rush and I smiled a ridiculously thankful smile. “There’s no hurry,” I almost said, then realised she hadn’t seen me. She was talking about someone else, waiting outside. My heart clenched and forced a deep noise from me, a guttural groan that was primal in its depth of grief. That was when she saw me in my stupid uniform, waiting to serve them.

She handled it well.

“Hello.”

I only nodded. It was all I trusted myself with.

“I want this one,” Danny said. He was only talking about a Mars bar.

Jo’s eyes were still on me. She wiped at them before tears could fall. I’ve no idea why she might have wanted to cry.

“We can get it somewhere else,” she told him, “Come on.”

I wanted to tell her I’m okay now. I wanted to tell her the things I remember and see if she remembers them too. I wanted to tell her I’ve read *Sense and Sensibility* for the hundredth first time and that I liked

it, except for the ending. Most of all I wanted to ask if we could try again, or try something different, wipe the slate clean, but she was ushering Danny out the door. The bell above it tinkled and he looked back. He smiled and then he was urged outside.

She needn't have rushed him away, though.

He doesn't remember me at all.

THE EYES OF THAR, by Henry Kuttner

He had come back, though he knew what to expect. He had always come back to Klanvahr, since he had been hunted out of that ancient Martian fortress so many years ago. Not often, and always warily, for there was a price on Dantan's head, and those who governed the Dry Provinces would have been glad to pay it. Now there was an excellent chance that they might pay, and soon, he thought, as he walked doggedly through the baking stillness of the night, his ears attuned to any dangerous sound in the thin, dry air.

Even after dark it was hot here. The dead ground, parched and arid, retained the heat, releasing it slowly as the double moons—the Eyes of Thar, in Klanvahr mythology—swung across the blazing immensity of the sky. Yet Samuel Dantan came back to this desolate land as he had come before, drawn by love and by hatred.

The love was lost forever, but the hate could still be satiated. He had not yet glutted his blood-thirst. When Dantan came back to Klanvahr, men died, though if all the men of the Redhelm Tribe were slain, even that could not satisfy the dull ache in Dantan's heart.

Now they were hunting him.

The girl—he had not thought of her for years; he did not want to remember. He had been young when it happened. Of Earth stock, he had during a great Martian drought become godson to an old shaman of Klanvahr, one of the priests who still hoarded scraps of the forgotten knowledge of the past, glorious days of Martian destiny, when bright towers had fingered up triumphantly toward the Eyes of Thar.

Memories…the solemn, antique dignity of the Undercities, in ruins now…the wrinkled shaman, intoning his rituals…very old books, and older stories…raids by the Redhelm Tribe…and a girl Samuel Dantan had known. There was a raid, and the girl had died. Such things had happened many times before; they would happen again. But to Dantan this one death mattered very much.

Afterward, Dantan killed, first in red fury, then with a cool, quiet, passionless satisfaction. And, since the Redhelms were well represented in the corrupt Martian government, he had become outlaw.

The girl would not have known him now. He had gone out into the spaceways, and the years had changed him. He was still thin, his eyes still dark and opaque as shadowed tarn-water, but he was dry and sinewy and hard, moving with the trained, dangerous swiftness of the predator he was—and, as to morals, Dantan had none worth mentioning. He had broken more than ten commandments. Between

the planets, and in the far-flung worlds bordering the outer dark, there are more than ten. But Dantan had smashed them all.

In the end there was still the dull, sickening hopelessness, part loneliness, part something less definable. Hunted, he came back to Klanvahr, and when he came, men of the Redhelms died. They did not die easily.

But this time it was they who hunted, not he. They had cut him off from the air-car and they followed now like hounds upon his track. He had almost been disarmed in that last battle. And the Redhelms would not lose the trail; they had followed sign for generations across the dying tundras of Mars.

He paused, flattening himself against an outcrop of rock, and looked back. It was dark; the Eyes of Thar had not yet risen, and the blaze of starlight cast a ghastly, leprous shine over the chaotic slope behind him, great riven boulders and jutting monoliths, canyon-like, running jagged toward the horizon, a scene of cosmic ruin that every old and shrinking world must show. He could see nothing of his pursuers, but they were coming. They were still far behind. But that did not matter; he must circle—circle—

And first, he must regain a little strength. There was no water in his canteen. His throat was dust-dry, and his tongue felt swollen and leathery. Moving his shoulders uneasily, his dark face impassive, Dantan found a pebble and put it in his mouth, though he knew that would not help much. He had not tasted water for—how long? Too long, anyhow.

* * * *

Staring around, he took stock of resources. He was alone—what was it the old shaman had once told him? “You are never alone in Klanvahr. The living shadows of the past are all around you. They cannot help, but they watch, and their pride must not be humbled. You are never alone in Klanvahr.”

But nothing stirred. Only a whisper of the dry, hot wind murmuring up from the distance, sighing and soughing like muted harps. Ghosts of the past riding the night, Dantan thought. How did those ghosts see Klanvahr? Not as this desolate wasteland, perhaps. They saw it with the eyes of memory, as the Mother of Empires which Klanvahr had once been, so long ago that only the tales persisted, garbled and unbelievable.

A sighing whisper…he stopped living for a second, his breath halted, his eyes turned to emptiness. That meant something. A thermal, a river of wind—a downdraft, perhaps. Sometimes these eon-

old canyons held lost rivers, changing and shifting their courses as Mars crumbled, and such watercourses might be traced by sound.

Well—he knew Klanvahr.

A half mile farther he found the arroyo, not too deep—fifty feet or less, with jagged walls easy to descend. He could hear the trickle of water, though he could not see it, and his thirst became overpowering. But caution made him clamber down the precipice warily. He did not drink till he had reconnoitered and made sure that it was safe.

And that made Dantan's thin lips curl. Safety for a man hunted by the Redhelms? The thought was sufficiently absurd. He would die—he must die; but he did not mean to die alone. This time perhaps they had him, but the kill would not be easy nor without cost. If he could find some weapon, some ambush—prepare some trap for the hunters —

There might be possibilities in this canyon. The stream had only lately been diverted into this channel; the signs of that were clear. Thoughtfully Dantan worked his way upstream. He did not try to mask his trail by water-tricks; the Redhelms were too wise for that. No, there must be some other answer.

A mile or so farther along he found the reason for the diverted stream. Landslide. Where water had chuckled and rustled along the left-hand branch before, now it took the other route. Dantan followed the dry canyon, finding the going easier now, since Phobos had risen…an Eye of Thar. "The Eyes of the god miss nothing. They move across the world, and nothing can hide from Thar, or from his destiny."

Then Dantan saw rounded metal. Washed clean by the water that had run here lately, a corroded, curved surface rose dome-shaped from the stream bed.

The presence of an artifact in this place was curious enough. The people of Klanvahr—the old race—had builded with some substance that had not survived; plastic or something else that was not metal. Yet this dome had the unmistakable dull sheen of steel. It was an alloy, unusually strong or it could never have lasted this long, even though protected by its covering of rocks and earth. A little nerve began jumping in Dantan's cheek. He had paused briefly, but now he came forward and with his booted foot kicked away some of the dirt about the cryptic metal.

A curving line broke it. Scraping vigorously, Dantan discovered that this marked the outline of an oval door, horizontal, and with a handle of some sort, though it was caked and fixed in its socket with dirt. Dantan's lips were very thin now, and his eyes glittering and bright. An ambush—a weapon against the Redhelms—whatever might exist behind this lost door, it was worth investigating, especially for a

condemned man.

With water from the brook and a sliver of sharp stone, he pried and chiseled until the handle was fairly free from its heavy crust. It was a hook, like a shepherd's crook, protruding from a small bowl-shaped depression in the door. Dantan tested it. It would not move in any direction. He braced himself, legs straddled, body half doubled, and strained at the hook.

Blood beat against the back of his eyes. He heard drumming in his temples and straightened suddenly, thinking it the footsteps of Redhelms. Then, grinning sardonically, he bent to his work again, and this time the handle moved.

Beneath him the door slid down and swung aside, and the darkness below gave place to soft light. He saw a long tube stretching down vertically, with pegs protruding from the metal walls at regular intervals. It made a ladder. The bottom of the shaft was thirty feet below; its diameter was little more than the breadth of a big man's shoulders.

* * * *

He stood still for a moment, looking down, his mind almost swimming with wonder and surmise. Old, very old it must be, for the stream had cut its own bed out of the rock whose walls rose above him now. Old—and yet these metal surfaces gleamed as brightly as they must have gleamed on the day they were put together—for what purpose?

The wind sighed again down the canyon, and Dantan remembered the Redhelms on his track. He looked around once more and then lowered himself onto the ladder of metal pegs, testing them doubtfully before he let his full weight come down. They held.

There might be danger down below; there might not. There was certain danger coming after him among the twisting canyons. He reached up, investigated briefly, and swung the door back into place. There was a lock, he saw, and after a moment discovered how to manipulate it. So far, the results were satisfactory. He was temporarily safe from the Redhelms, provided he did not suffocate. There was no air intake here that he could see, but he breathed easily enough so far. He would worry about that when the need arose. There might be other things to worry about before lack of air began to distress him.

He descended.

At the bottom of the shaft was another door. Its handle yielded with no resistance this time, and Dantan stepped across the threshold into a large, square underground chamber, lit with pale radiance that

came from the floor itself, as though light had been poured into the molten metal when it had first been made.

The room—

Faintly he heard a distant humming, like the after-resonance of a bell, but it died away almost instantly. The room was large, and empty except for some sort of machine standing against the farther wall. Dantan was not a technician. He knew guns and ships; that was enough. But the smooth, sleek functionalism of this machine gave him an almost sensuous feeling of pleasure.

How long had it been here? Who had built it? And for what purpose? He could not even guess. There was a great oval screen on the wall above what seemed to be a control board, and there were other, more enigmatic devices.

And the screen was black—dead black, with a darkness that ate up the light in the room and gave back nothing.

Yet there was something—

"Sanfel," a voice said. "Sanfel. Coth dr'gchang. Sanfel—sthan!"

Sanfel…Sanfel…have you returned, Sanfel? Answer!

It was a woman's voice…the voice of a woman used to wielding power, quiet, somehow proud as the voice of Lucifer or Lilith might have been, and it spoke in a tongue that scarcely half a dozen living men could understand… A whole great race had spoken it once; only the shamans remembered now, and the shamans who knew it were few. Dantan's godfather had been one. And Dantan remembered the slurring syllables of the rituals he had learned, well enough to know what the proud, bodiless voice was saying.

The nape of his neck prickled. Here was something he could not understand, and he did not like it. Like an animal scenting danger he shrank into himself, not crouching, but withdrawing, so that a smaller man seemed to stand there, ready and waiting for the next move. Only his eyes were not motionless. They raked the room for the unseen speaker—for some weapon to use when the time came for weapons.

His glance came back to the dark screen above the machine. And the voice said again, in the tongue of ancient, Klanvahr:

"I am not used to waiting, Sanfel! If you hear me, speak. And speak quickly, for the time of peril comes close now. My Enemy is strong—"

Dantan said, "Can you hear me?" His eyes did not move from the screen.

Out of that blackness the girl's voice came, after a pause. It was imperious, and a little wary.

"You are not Sanfel. Where is he? Who are you, Martian?"

Dantan let himself relax a little. There would be a parley, at any rate. But after that—

Words in the familiar, remembered old language came hesitantly to his lips.

"I am no Martian. I am of Earth blood, and I do not know this Sanfel."

"Then how did you get into Sanfel's place?" The voice was haughty now. "What are you doing there? Sanfel built his laboratory in a secret place."

"It was hidden well enough," Dantan told her grimly. "Maybe for a thousand years, or even ten thousand, for all I know. The door has been buried under a stream—"

"There is no water there. Sanfel's home is on a mountain, and his laboratory is built underground." The voice rang like a bell. "I think you lie. I think you are an enemy—When I heard the signal summoning me, I came swiftly, wondering why Sanfel had delayed so long. I must find him, stranger. I must! If you are no enemy, bring me Sanfel!" This time there was something almost like panic in the voice.

"If I could, I would," Dantan said. "But there's no one here except me." He hesitated, wondering if the woman behind the voice could be —mad? Speaking from some mysterious place beyond the screen, in a language dead a thousand years, calling upon a man who must be long-dead too, if one could judge by the length of time this hidden room had lain buried.

He said after a moment, "This place has been buried for a long time. And—no one has spoken the tongue of Klanvahr for many centuries. If that was your Sanfel's language—" But he could not go on with that thought. If Sanfel had spoken Klanvahr then he must have died long ago. And the speaker beyond the screen—she who had known Sanfel, yet spoke in a young, sweet, light voice that Dantan was beginning to think sounded familiar… He wondered if he could be mad too.

There was silence from the screen. After many seconds the voice spoke again, sadly and with an undernote of terror.

"I had not realized," it said, "that even time might be so different between Sanfel's world and mine. The space-time continua—yes, a day in my world might well be an age in yours. Time is elastic. In Zha I had thought a few dozen—" she used a term Dantan did not understand, "—had passed. But on Mars—centuries?"

"Tens of centuries," agreed Dantan, staring hard at the screen. "If Sanfel lived in old Klanvahr his people are scarcely a memory now. And Mars is dying. You—you're speaking from another world?"

"From another universe, yes. A very different universe from yours. It was only through Sanfel that I had made contact, until now—What is your name?"

"Dantan. Samuel Dantan."

"Not a Martian name. You are from—Earth, you say? What is that?"

"Another planet. Nearer the sun than Mars."

"We have no planets and no suns in Zha.

This is a different universe indeed. So different I find it hard to imagine what your world must be like…"

The voice died.

And it was a voice he knew. Dantan was nearly sure of that now, and the certainty frightened him. When a man in the Martian desert begins to see or hear impossibilities, he has reason to be frightened. As the silence prolonged itself he began almost to hope that the voice—the implausibly familiar voice—had been only imagination. Hesitantly he said, "Are you still there?" and was a little relieved, after all, to hear her say,

"Yes, I am here. I was thinking…I need help. I need it desperately. I wonder—has Sanfel's laboratory changed? Does the machine still stand? But it must, or I could not speak to you now. If the other things work, there may be chance… Listen." Her voice grew urgent. "I may have a use for you. Do you see a lever, scarlet, marked with the Klanvahr symbol for 'sight'?"

"I see it," Dantan said.

"Push it forward. There is no harm in that, if you are careful. We can see each other—that is all. But do not touch the lever with the 'door' symbol on it. Be certain of that… Wait!" Sudden urgency was in the voice.

"Yes?" Dantan had not moved. "I am forgetting. There is danger if you are not protected from—from certain vibration that you might see here. This is a different universe, and your Martian physical laws do not hold good between our worlds. Vibration…light…either things might harm you. There should be armor in Sanfel's laboratory. Find it."

Dantan glanced around. There was a cabinet in one corner. He went over to it slowly, his eyes wary. He had no intention of relaxing vigilance here simply because that voice sounded familiar…

Inside the cabinet hung a suit of something like space armor, more flexible and skin tight than any he had ever seen, and with a transparent helmet through which vision seemed oddly distorted. He got into the suit carefully, pulling up the rich shining folds over his body, thinking strangely how long time had stood still in this small room since the last time a man had worn it. The whole room looked slightly different when he set the helmet into place. It must be polarized, he decided, though that alone could not account for the strange dimming and warping of vision that was evident.

"All ready," he said after a moment."

"Then throw the switch."

With his hand upon it Dantan hesitated for one last instant of wariness. He was stepping into unknown territory now, and to him the unknown meant the perilous. His mind went back briefly to the Redhelms scouring the canyons above for him. He quieted his uneasy mind with the thought that there might be some weapon in the world of the voice which he could turn against them later. Certainly, without a weapon, he had little to lose. But he knew that weapon or no weapon, danger or not, he must see the face behind that sweet, familiar, imperious voice.

He pressed the lever forward. It hesitated, the weight of milleniums behind its inertia. Then, groaning a little in its socket, it moved.

Across the screen above it a blaze of color raged like a sudden shining deluge. Blinded by the glare, Dajatan leaped back and swung an arm across his eyes.

When he looked again the colors had cleared. Blinking, he stared —and forgot to look away. For the screen was a window now, with the world of Zha behind it… And in the center of that window—a girl. He looked once at her, and then closed his eyes. He had felt his heart move, and a nerve jumped in his lean cheek.

He whispered a name.

Impassively the girl looked down at him from the screen. There was no change, no light of recognition upon that familiar, beloved face. The face of the girl who had died at the Redhelm hands, long ago, in the fortress of Klanvahr… For her sake he had hunted the Redhelms all these dangerous years. For her sake he had taken to the spaceways and the outlaw life. In a way, for her sake the Redhelms hunted him now through the canyons overhead. But here in the screen, she did not know him.

He knew that this was not possible. Some outrageous trick of vision made the face and the slender body of a woman from another universe seem the counterpart of that remembered woman. But he knew it must be an illusion, for in a world as different as Zha surely there could be no human creatures at all, certainly no human who wore the same face as the girl he remembered.

* * * *

Aside from the girl herself, there was nothing to see. The screen was blank, except for vague shapes—outlines—The helmet, he thought, filtered out more than light. He sensed, somehow, that beyond her stretched the world of Zha, but he could see nothing

except the shifting, ever-changing colors of the background.

She looked down at him without expression. Obviously the sight of him had wakened in her no such deep-reaching echoes of emotion as her face woke in him. She said, her voice almost unbearably familiar; a voice sounding from the silence of death over many chilly years,

"Dantan. Samuel Dantan. Earthly language is as harsh as the Klanvahr I learned from Sanfel. Yet my name may seem strange to you. I am Quiana."

He said hoarsely, "What do you want? What did you want with Sanfel?"

"Help," Quiana said. "A weapon. Sanfel had promised me a weapon. He was working very hard to make one, risking much…and now time has eaten him up—that strange, capricious time that varies so much between your world and mine. To me it was only yesterday—and I still need the weapon."

Dantan's laugh was harsh with jealousy of that unknown and long-dead Martian.

"Then I'm the wrong man," he said roughly. "I've no weapon. I've men tracking me down to kill me, now."

She leaned forward a little, gesturing. "Can you escape? You are hidden here, you know."

"They'll find the same way I found, up above."

"The laboratory door can be locked, at the top of the shaft."

"I know. I locked it. But there's no food or water here… No, if I had any weapons I wouldn't be here now."

"Would you not?" she asked in a curious voice. "In old Klanvahr, Sanfel once told me, they had a saying that none could hide from his destiny."

Dantan gave her a keen, inquiring look. Did she mean—herself? That same face and voice and body, so cruelly come back from death to waken the old grief anew? Or did she know whose likeness she wore—or could it be only his imagination, after all? For if Sanfel had known her too, and if Sanfel had died as long ago as he must have died, then this same lovely image had lived centuries and milleniums before the girl at Klanvahr Fortress…

"I remember," said Dantan briefly.

"My world," she went on, oblivious to the turmoil in his mind, "my world is too different to offer you any shelter, though I suppose you could enter it for a little while, in that protective armor that Sanfel made. But not to stay. We spring from soil too alien to one another's worlds… Even this communication is not easy. And there is no safety here in Zha either, now. Now that Sanfel has failed me."

"I—I'd help you if I could." He said it with difficulty, trying to

force the remembrance upon himself that this was a stranger… "Tell me what's wrong."

She shrugged with a poignantly familiar motion.

"I have an Enemy. One of a lower race. And he—it—there is no word!—has cut me off from my people here in a part of Zha that is—well, dangerous—I can't describe to you the conditions here. We have no common terms to use in speaking of them. But there is great danger, and the Enemy is coming closer—and I am alone. If there were another of my people here to divide the peril I think I could destroy him. He has a weapon of his own, and it is stronger than my power, though not stronger than the power two of my race together can wield. It—it pulls. It destroys, in a way I can find no word to say. I had hoped from Sanfel something to divert him until he could be killed. I told him how to forge such a weapon, but—time would not let him do it. The teeth of time ground him into dust, as my Enemy's weapon will grind me soon."

She shrugged again.

"If I could get you a gun," Dantan said. "A force-ray—"

"What are they?"

He described the weapons of his day. But Quiana's smile was a little scornful when he finished.

"We of Zha have passed beyond the use of missile weapons—even such missiles as bullets or rays. Nor could they touch my Enemy. No, we can destroy in ways that require no—no beams or explosives. No, Dantan, you speak in terms of your own universe. We have no common ground. It is a pity that time eddied between Sanfel and me, but eddy it did, and I am helpless now. And the Enemy will be upon me soon. Very soon."

She let her shoulders sag and resignation dimmed the remembered vividness of her face. Dantan looked up at her grimly, muscles riding his set jaw. It was almost intolerable, this facing her again in need, and again helpless, and himself without power to aid. It had been bad enough that first time, to learn long afterward that she had died at enemy hands while he was too far away to protect her. But to see it all take place again before his very eyes!

"There must be a way," he said, and his hand gripped the lever marked "door" in the ancient tongue.

"Wait!" Quiana's voice was urgent.

"What would happen?"

"The door would open. I could enter your world, and you mine."

"Why can't you leave, then, and wait until it's safe to go back?"

"I have tried that," Quiana said. "It will never be safe. The Enemy waited too. No, it must come, in the end, to a battle—and I shall not win that fight. I shall not see my own people or my own land again,

and I suppose I must face that knowledge. But I did hope, when I heard Sanfel's signal sound again…" She smiled a little. "I know you would help me if you could, Dantan. But there is nothing to be done now."

"I'll come in," he said doggedly. "Maybe there's something I could do."

"You could not touch him. Even now there's danger. He was very close when I heard that signal. This is his territory. When I heard the bell and thought Sanfel had returned with a weapon for me, I dared greatly in coming here." Her voice died away; a withdrawn look veiled her eyes from him.

After a long silence she said, "The Enemy is coming. Turn off the screen, Dantan. And goodbye."

"No," he said. "Wait!" But she shook her head and turned away from him, her thin robe swirling, and moved off like a pale shadow into the dim, shadowless emptiness of the background. He stood watching helplessly, feeling all the old despair wash over him a second time as the girl he loved went alone into danger he could not share. Sometimes as she moved away she was eclipsed by objects he could not see—trees, he thought, or rocks, that did not impinge upon his eyes through the protective helmet. A strange world indeed Zha must be, whose very rocks and trees were too alien for human eyes to look upon in safety… Only Quiana grew smaller and smaller upon the screen, and it seemed to Dantan as though a cord stretched between them, pulling thinner and thinner as she receded into danger and distance.

It was unbearable to think that the cord might break—break a second time…

* * * *

Far away something moved in the cloudy world of Zha. Tiny in the distance though it was, it was unmistakably not human. Dantan lost sight of Quiana. Had she found some hiding place behind some unimaginable outcropping of Zha's terrain?

The Enemy came forward.

It was huge and scaled and terrible, human, but not a human; tailed, but no beast; intelligent, but diabolic. He never saw it too clearly, and he was grateful to his helmet for that. The polarized glass seemed to translate a little, as well as to blot out. He felt sure that this creature which he saw—or almost saw—did not look precisely as it seemed to him upon the screen. Yet it was easy to believe that such a being had sprung from the alien soil of Zha. There was nothing

remotely like it on any of the worlds he knew. And it was hateful. Every line of it made his hackles bristle.

It carried a coil of brightly colored tubing slung over one grotesque shoulder, and its monstrous head swung from side to side as it paced forward into the screen like some strange and terrible mechanical toy. It made no sound, and its progress was horrible in its sheer relentless monotony.

* * * *

Abruptly it paused. He thought it had sensed the girl's presence, somewhere in hiding. It reached for the coil of tubing with one malformed—hand?

"Quiana," it said—its voice as gentle as a child's.

Silence. Dantan's breathing was loud in the emptiness.

"Quiana?" The tone was querulous now.

"Quiana," the monster crooned, and swung about with sudden, unexpected agility. Moving with smooth speed, it vanished into the clouds of the background, as the girl had vanished. For an eternity Dantan watched colored emptiness, trying to keep himself from trembling.

Then he heard the voice again, gentle no longer, but ringing like a bell with terrible triumph, "Quiana!"

And out of the swirling clouds he saw Quiana break, despair upon her face, her sheer garments streaming behind her. After her came the Enemy. It had unslung the tube it wore over its shoulder, and as it lifted the weapon Quiana swerved desperately aside. Then from the coil of tubing blind lightning ravened.

Shattering the patternless obscurity, the blaze of its color burst out, catching Quiana in a cone of expanding, shifting brilliance. And the despair in her eyes was suddenly more than Dantan could endure.

His hand struck out at the lever marked "door"; he swung it far over and the veil that had masked the screen was gone. He vaulted up over its low threshold, not seeing anything but the face and the terror of Quiana. But it was not Quiana's name he called as he leaped.

He lunged through the Door onto soft, yielding substance that was unlike anything he had ever felt underfoot before. He scarcely knew it. He flung himself forward, fists clenched, ready to drive futile blows into the monstrous mask of the Enemy. It loomed over him like a tower, tremendous, scarcely seen through the shelter of his helmet—and then the glare of the light-cone caught him.

It was tangible light. It flung him back with a piledriver punch that knocked the breath from his body. And the blow was psychic as

well as physical. Shaking and reeling from the shock, Dantan shut his eyes and fought forward, as though against a steady current too strong to breast very long. He felt Quiana beside him, caught in the same dreadful stream. And beyond the source of the light the Enemy stood up in stark, inhuman silhouette.

He never saw Quiana's world. The light was too blinding. And yet, in a subtle sense, it was not blinding to the eyes, but to the mind. Nor was it light, Dantan thought, with some sane part of his mind. Too late he remembered Quiana's warning that the world of Zha was not Mars or Earth, that in Zha even light was different.

Cold and heat mingled, indescribably bewildering, shook him hard. And beyond these were—other things. The light from the Enemy's weapon was not born in Dantan's universe, and it had properties that light should not have. He felt bare, emptied, a hollow shell through which radiance streamed.

For suddenly, every cell of his body was an eye. The glaring brilliance, the intolerable vision beat at the foundations of his sanity. Through him the glow went pouring, washing him, nerves, bone, flesh, brain, in floods of color that were not color, sound that was not sound, vibration that was spawned in the shaking hells of worlds beyond imagination.

It inundated him like a tide, and for a long, long, timeless while he stood helpless in its surge, moving within his body and without it, and within his mind and soul as well. The color of stars thundered in his brain. The crawling foulness of unspeakable hues writhed along his nerves so monstrously that he felt he could never cleanse himself of that obscenity.

And nothing else existed—only the light that was not light, but blasphemy.

Then it began to ebb…faded…grew lesser and lesser, until—Beside him he could see Quiana now. She was no longer stumbling in the cone of light, no longer shuddering and wavering in its violence, but standing erect and facing the Enemy, and from her eyes—something—poured.

Steadily the cone of brilliance waned. But still its glittering, shining foulness poured through Dantan. He felt himself weakening, his senses fading, as the tide of dark horror mounted through his brain.

And covered him up with its blanketing immensity.

* * * *

He was back in the laboratory, leaning against the wall and

breathing in deep, shuddering draughts. He did not remember stumbling through the Door again, but he was no longer in Zha. Quiana stood beside him, here upon the Martian soil of the laboratory. She was watching him with a strange, quizzical look in her eyes as he slowly fought back to normal, his heart quieting by degrees, his breath becoming evener. He felt drained, exhausted, his emotions cleansed and purified as though by baths of flame.

Presently he reached for the clasp that fastened his clumsy armor. Quiana put out a quick hand, shaking her head.

"No," she said, and then stared at him again for a long moment without speaking. Finally, "I had not known—I did not think this could be done. Another of my own race—yes. But you, from Mars—I would not have believed that you could stand against the Enemy for a moment, even with your armor."

"I'm from Earth, not Mars. And I didn't stand long."

"Long enough," She smiled faintly. "You see now what happened? We of Zha can destroy without weapons, using only the power inherent in our bodies. Those like the Enemy have a little of that power too, but they need mechanical devices to amplify it. And so when you diverted the Enemy's attention and forced him to divide his attack between us—the pressure upon me was relieved, and I could destroy him. But I would not have believed it possible."

"You're safe now," Dantan said, with no expression in voice or face.

"Yes. I can return."

"And you will?"

"Of course I shall."

"We are more alike than you had realized."

She looked up toward the colored curtain of the screen. "That is true. It is not the complete truth, Dantan."

He said, "I love you—Quiana." This time he called her by name.

Neither of them moved. Minutes went by silently.

Quiana said, as if she had not heard him, "Those who followed you are here. I have been listening to them for some time now. They are trying to break through the door at the top of the shaft."

He took her hand in his gloved grasp. "Stay here. Or let me go back to Zha with you. Why not?"

"You could not live there without your armor."

"Then stay."

Quiana looked away, her eyes troubled. As Dantan moved to slip off his helmet her hand came up again to stop him.

"Don't."

"Why not?"

For answer she rose, beckoning for him to follow. She stepped

across the threshold into the shaft and swiftly began to climb the pegs toward the surface and the hammering of the Redhelms up above. Dantan, at her gesture, followed.

Over her shoulder she said briefly, “We are of two very different worlds. Watch—but be careful.” And she touched the device that locked the oval door.

It slipped down and swung aside.

* * * *

Dantan caught one swift glimpse of Redhelm heads dodging back to safety. They did not know, of course, that he was unarmed. He reached up desperately, trying to pull Quiana back but she slipped aside and sprang lightly out of the shaft into the cool gray light of the Martian morning.

Forgetting her warning, Dantan pulled himself up behind her. But as his head and shoulders emerged from the shaft he stopped, frozen. For the Redhelms were falling. There was no mark upon them, yet they fell…

* * * *

She did not stir, even when the last man had stiffened into rigid immobility. Then Dantan clambered up and without looking at Quiana went to the nearest body and turned it over. He could find no mark. Yet the Redhelm was dead.

“That is why you had to wear the armor,” she told him gently. “We are of different worlds, you and I.”

He took her in his arms—and the soft resilience of her was lost against the stiffness of the protective suit. He would never even know how her body felt, because of the armor between them… He could not even kiss her—again. He had taken his last kiss of the mouth so like Quiana’s mouth, long years ago, and he would never kiss it again. The barrier was too high between them.

“You can’t go back,” he told her in a rough, uneven voice. “We are of the same world, no matter what—no matter how—You’re no stranger to me, Quiana!”

She looked up at him with troubled eyes, shaking her head, regret in her voice.

“Do you think I don’t know why you fought for me, Dantan?” she asked in a clear voice. “Did you ever stop to wonder why Sanfel risked so much for me, too?”

He stared down at her, his brain spinning, almost afraid to hear what she would say next. He did not want to hear. But her voice went on inexorably.

"I cheated you, Dantan. I cheated Sanfel yesterday—a thousand years ago. My need was very great, you see—and our ways are not yours. I knew that no man would fight for a stranger as I needed a man to fight for me."

He held her tightly in gloved hands that could feel only a firm body in their grasp, not what that body was really like, nothing about it except its firmness. He caught his breath to interrupt, but she went on with a rush.

"I have no way of knowing how you see me, Dantan," she said relentlessly. "I don't know how Sanfel saw me. To each of you—because I needed your help—I wore the shape to which you owed help most. I could reach into your minds deeply enough for that—to mould a remembered body for your eyes. My own shape is—different. You will never know it." She sighed. "You were a brave man, Dantan. Braver and stronger than I ever dreamed an alien could be. I wish—I wonder—Oh, let me go! Let me go!"

She whirled out of his grasp with sudden vehemence, turning her face away so that he could not see her eyes. Without glancing at him again she bent over the shaft and found the topmost pegs, and in a moment was gone.

Dantan stood there, waiting. Presently he heard the muffled humming of a muted bell, as though sounding from another world. Then he knew that there was no one in the ancient laboratory beneath his feet.

He shut the door carefully and scraped soil over it. He did not mark the place. The dim red spot of the sun was rising above the canyon wall. His face set, Dantan began walking toward the distant cavern where his aircar was hidden. It was many miles away, but there was no one to stop him, now.

He did not look back.

REGENESIS, by Cynthia Ward

Last cybercast from Google-Fox reporter Daniel Lundgren:

Lundgren [in a hallway bustling with suited men and women]: "This is Dan Lundgren, Google-Fox News, in Paris. I'm at the World Health Organization Conference on Genetic Therapy, where doctors and scientists are expressing alarm at the latest fashion trend. 'A fashion trend?' you might say? Medicine has nothing to do with style. Or, rather, *had*. A medical breakthrough has become just another fashion statement."

Cut to a young woman onstage, playing electric guitar in front of a thunderous retro-industrial band. Cut to Lundgren backstage with the woman: "We're speaking with Marie Durand, lead guitarist of Jackhammer. Marie, many people would say you're abusing genetic therapy. They believe you're desecrating a medical miracle for the sake of au couture."

Durand [in a heavy French accent]: "They are fools. It has nothing to do with style." Her hands rise into sight, gesturing. They seem too large for her slight size. "Fashion is transient. Art is eternal." Closeup of one hand: The fingers are too long for the palm, and there are too many of them. Six. "I cut off my fingers. I would never do such a thing, except for art."

Cut to a bandaged hand, a stump without fingers or thumb. Time-lapse video shows five bumps peeping through the bandage, and the bandage bulging along the outside edge of the palm. Then the palm is bare, fingers and thumb growing—growing too long—and a second thumb swelling from once-raw flesh.

Durand [voiceover]: "I cut off my fingers only to become the greatest guitarist in the world."

Cut to a small brown tailless lizard, sprouting a tail in time-lapse. Lundgren [voiceover]: "Once genetic engineers decoded the lizard's ability to regenerate a lost tail, human limb regeneration was no longer a fantasy. But no one realized the fantastic uses to which it could, and would, be put."

Cut to a beautiful Congolese woman with one brown eye, one green eye, and, in the center of her forehead, one blue eye.

Voiceover: "Are we taking regeneration too far?"

Cut to Lundgren, alone: "One thing is clear: Genetic therapists are giving plastic surgery a whole new meaning."

Cut to Lundgren with an East Indian man in a Western suit tailored to reveal a long, supple, black-haired tail: "Dr. Charaka Ashok is a genetic engineer participating in the WHO Conference. Dr. Ashok, many would claim you've made a mockery of your profession by

giving yourself a monkey's tail."

Dr. Ashok [in a faint Bengali accent]: "They speak from ignorance. I haven't introduced a single gene from another species into my body. My tail is from the human genetic code—from the 'junk DNA.' 'Junk genes' are fossils: dormant genes inherited from our prehuman ancestors. Selective activation of the lizard gene and other fossil genes can stimulate the growth of tails, fangs, body fur, and other physical features not normally part of the human body."

Lundgren: "I…see. But I don't see why a distinguished scientist would grow a tail."

Dr. Ashok: "It's a demonstration of truth. How better to manifest the fact of evolution? How better to refute religious fundamentalists who claim man was created by God? And refutation is more necessary than ever, with so many fundamentalists seeking to impose their ignorance on others. Religious terrorists are murdering genetic engineers and bombing gene-therapy clinics. Fanatics are clashing the world over." Jump-cuts: screaming protestors; bombed-out buildings; battlefields. "In India, extremist Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs are in violent conflict with one another. And an apocalyptic Hindu sect has declared a man the latest avatar of the god Vishnu."

Cut to: Very long shot of East Indians; most appear to be laborers, farmers, and beggars. They cover a hill, surrounding a man in richly colored traditional clothing. The man is mounted on a white horse. He holds aloft a sword bathed in holographic flames. He has four arms.

Dr. Ashok [voiceover]: "According to Hindu belief, the next incarnation of Vishnu will be the tenth—and last. The last avatar, Kalki, heralds the end of the Kali-Yuga, the Iron Age—the end of the world as we know it. The extremists believe Kalki is here and it is their duty to bring the world to an end."

Cut to Lundgren and Dr. Ashok: "Dr. Ashok, I find it hard to believe a mob of poor, ignorant fanatics can destroy the world."

Dr. Ashok: "I was in the University of Washington graduate biotech program with Kalki when he was two-armed Sunesh Bannerjee. Kalki is a brilliant virologist and genetic engineer. He has the knowledge and the ability to kill millions."

Cut to Lundgren alone: "There you have it. Regenerative changes that look like fashion are, in fact, acts of faith. Guitarist Marie Durand believes adding a second thumb to each hand will make her a great artist. Dr. Charaka Ashok believes his tail is evidence of the truth of Darwinism. And it seems a brilliant, four-armed scientist may believe himself a god destined to destroy the world. Tomorrow night at 9 PM Eastern time, we investigate Dr. Sunesh 'Kalki' Bannerjee. With Google-Fox News, this is Dan Lundgren."

Last private communication from Lundgren:

“Why’d you ignore my emails and voicemails telling you to cancel upload of my WHO report? I told you I’m too sick to move, never mind investigate Kalki. I don’t remember drinking any local water, but I must’ve forgotten to tell somebody to hold the ice for a Coke. I’ve got dysentery from Hell. And India’s hotter than Hell and I can’t get anyone to fix my air conditioning. This is supposed to be a four-star hotel, but I haven’t been able to reach a staff member all day. They’re not answering the phone, you’re not answering the phone—oh. Oh, God, no—”

NOT OMNIPOTENT ENOUGH, by George H. Scithers and John Gregory Betancourt

"Your Imperiality!" said someone in the little group of nine brightly dressed men and women, who whirled, then bowed low or curtsied to me. I'd revived that custom from Old Earth this morning, after I accepted the crown of the Imperium.

As I strode among these friends of mine from the days when I had been just a very junior professor of Pre-Spaceflight History, I longed to smile and joke and be my old self, the same Jad denRigen they'd known and worked with for endless tennights at the University. The Imperial title had not yet penetrated my inner self any more than the purple of my Imperial robes. Still, these former colleagues were but a small wave in the ocean of humanity that surrounded me in the Coronation Ballroom, and I forced myself to remain stiff-backed and aloof. Roman emperors had died for smaller sins than getting too close to the common folk.

I allowed myself a low-voiced, "Hello," as they straightened up again.

"Imperiality!" said Rina; she was even more breathless than I remembered. "Everything's been so—so—oh, these last two tennights, and your coronation this morning, and a whole space-cruiser just to bring us here in time, and the delegations from all over the Galaxy, and everything running so smoothly!"

"It should, by now," I said with a tight smile. "After all, they've gone through four High Emperors in the last fifty tennights, not counting—"

"Your Imperiality," she protested, "I didn't mean—"

She dropped into a deep curtsy again. I could see the blush spreading across her face and neck.

"—not counting my great-uncle Tolan," I said, taking her hand and pulling her upright. "But that's all history now, Rina, and we've got better things to think about. Right?"

"Yes, Ja—I mean, Your Imperiality!" She started to curtsy again, but I motioned her to stop.

"Once is more than enough, really, Rina." I turned to the rest of my friends from the University. "How do you like it, all this? Quent?"

"Well…" He licked his lips thoughtfully, then gestured at the gigantic room around us. "It's so, big, even for an Imperial Coronation Ball. The size just doesn't come through, reading about it. You know

what I mean, Jad—uh, sorry, um—Your Imperiality."

I had to laugh. Normally he was the most polished lecturer at the University. And suddenly I found myself relaxing for the first time in more than a few tennights. These were my friends; I knew I could be myself around them. I was the Emperor, after all, and if I wanted to talk and joke with old colleagues, who would dare object?

Smiling broadly now, I said, "Jon, Mara, all of you, I'm so happy you're here. How are things at the University? And who took over my classes?"

Jon shook his dark head. "Rather more of a turmoil than we expected, actually, Your Imperiality. Ever since you left for Center System, everyone within parsecs has been calling the History Department with meaningless questions about you and your old job. Truth is, they think that since Your Imperiality came from there, we'll know all the palace gossip… "

"Well, I suppose that's the price one has to pay for fame. If I'd come from Center System instead of a backwater world, they'd already know all about me."

"And your classes," Jon went on. "Mara took them."

"Your Imperiality's notes were quite complete," said Mara, with the barest suggestion of a curtsy. "We finished the pre-Conquest kings of Britain just before the invitations came."

"Good. I don't think my students could be in better hands."

She smiled at something over my shoulder. "I could take your compliments all night, Imperiality, but I think you're about to be dragged away."

I turned to find two grave, gray-haired old men approaching: Vance Alderman and Teren al mar Axtant, two Grand Counsellors who had made it their duty to try to mold a poor young academic like me into their ideal High Emperor. I sighed.

Beramis scowled at them. "Four Emperors gone mad in just fifty tennights? I'd be careful, Imperiality—Jad, those men are doing their job too well."

"Only three went mad," I said. "Emperor Tolan resigned, after all." I shook my head. "This is no time for gloom. Let's—let's dance!"

Rina looked around vaguely. "Do you… does Your Imperiality think the music will begin soon?"

"There are certain advantages in being High Emperor," I said. I knew there were monitors in the ceiling picking up my every word, every Imperial command. I raised my hand, motioned, and the music started on cue, an ancient quadrille from pre-spaceflight Vienna.

Too soon, the dance ended and the music played out. The hundred or so people who had gathered to watch gave a brief spatter of applause. I beckoned to Mara; together, we swept around in one

last whirl.

"Wonderful!" she said. "Scarcely a missed step throughout."

"It's not as though we were unprepared," I said. Servants brought champaigne; I took a glass for each of us and we sipped gently. "The University holds dances every Saturday night, and all."

"You still couldn't have planned it better. I'm sure you impressed everyone."

I laughed. "Not the Grand Counsellors, surely. But you're right, I couldn't have planned it better. I knew you'd all dance as well as ever. In fact, you're all quite predictable."

"Oh, really?"

"Certainly. Rina is going to hang on Quent's every word for the rest of the evening, like she always does. And in a minute Beramis will join us and start telling those funny stories of his, and after that—"

"Shh! He's coming now!"

I grinned. "Didn't I tell you?"

Beramis and the others joined us. "Have you heard the story about the archaeologist, the historian, and the paleontogist, Imperiality?" Beramis said, then he launched into the first of a series of deftly-told jokes. As always, I tried to keep a straight face; as always, I was soon grinning, then chuckling, then roaring. I laughed as much at the wildly improbable stories as Beramis's own struggle to hold a straight face throughout them.

"Enough, enough!" I said, breathless. I wiped my eyes.

Still chuckling, I turned away, waving a hand behind me.

"Enough," I said, following the familiar ritual of oh-so-many gathering, back at the little University on a rather out-of-the-way planet, back when I'd been just plain Jad to everyone. "Somebody stop him; he's too far!"

"But you haven't heard what happened next," said Beramis, behind me now. "Then the Macedonian—Hey!"

A disruptor hissed close by. I whirled, instantly alert, as Rina's scream broke a sudden deathly silence. I heard a roaring in my ears; the world seemed to be moving too slowly, unnaturally slowly. Beramis was crumpling to the floor.

"No!" I shouted. I leaped forward, but it was too late and I knew it. He was dead, his face grossly distorted, blotches of red and blue and yellow replacing the tan of his skin.

I closed his eyes—I knew I couldn't do anything else for him now. Then, hearing sounds of a scuffle, I jerked my head up.

Jon and Quent were struggling with a man, one of the onlookers, while Ganion scrambled to help. The powerfully built stranger wore intricately embroidered clothing, a bright gold shirt and wine-red pants such as any high official might own. And he still held a

disruptor pistol in his hand.

"Kill—" I started, then caught myself. "No! Wait! I said wait!" The struggle froze, disruptor pistol pointed up at the distant ceiling. "That's better."

Slowly I stood. My mind seemed to be whirling along at an astounding rate, and all sorts of mental alarms shrilled at me. Something was very, very wrong here. Why would an assassin kill Beramis rather than me? And how had he managed to smuggle a disruptor into the Coronation Ballroom? A thousand safety devices should have prevented it. It didn't make sense… unless it were part of some larger plot.

I looked across the crowd that had gathered. *Which one of you is playing Livia to my Augustus?*

My first impulse had been to kill the murderer; my second, to question him. Either might be what was expected of me. I had to break out of the pattern, do something totally unexpected, if I was to get to the bottom of this.

I said: "Mara!"

"Jad?"

"Take his weapon. Hang on to it." I pointed to the killer. "You there! Put your pistol on 'safety'. Give it to her. Give her all your weapons. Understand?"

"Yes, Your Imperiality," the stranger said.

Jon and Quent loosened their hold enough for him to hand Mara both his disruptor pistol and a nasty-looking thermo-dagger.

"But if Your Imperiality will let me—"

"Explain?" I barked. "No! You will wait until I'm ready."

"But if Your Imperiality will let—"

"Shut up!"

He did so. I glanced around.

Ganion stood close, hands still full of purple satin.

"Vest me," I said quietly, and waited until the robes were on my shoulder again. Then, cautiously, step by step, I moved toward the killer. He cringed a bit as I neared, then caught himself, squared his shoulders, and tried to look me in the eye.

"Let me explain, Your—" he started.

"No!" I said. Pausing, I took a deep breath. "It seems to me that —" I stopped again, glanced around.

Behind me, Rina crouched over Beramis's body, sobbing quietly. Ganion stood at my elbow, Deak a few paces behind, and Quent and Jon still held the killer's arms. Mara stood a few paces behind Quent, holding the disruptor.

All around us, the crowd was growing larger. I saw, at its front, Grand Counsellor Alderman, Grand Counsellor Axtant, Grand

Counsellor—my eyes picked out members of the Grand Council faster than I could recall their names.

"Fascinating," I muttered.

"What, Jad?" asked Ganion. "I mean, Your—"

I shushed him with a curt gesture, then said quietly, "Deak, Ganion, listen: Somebody's about to try to kill our assassin. Be ready. Understand?"

"Kill him?" asked Deak. "But—ah!"

"That's right," I said, still keeping my voice low.

"Think!" I approached the killer again, and in a voice trained to cope with crowded lecture halls and bad acoustics, I declaimed, "This appears to be very eager to tell us something."

"Yes," said the killer. "Your Imperiality, I—"

"He is so eager," I continued, drowning out his voice, "that I have three times—*three times*—specifically ordered him not to speak, and still he tries."

"You slimy *ert*," growled Jon, wrenching the killer's arms behind his back. "You've got some explaining to do."

"Later," I said.

"But he killed—"

"Trust me. First, how would you describe this—the way he's acting?"

"Huh?" asked Jon. "Are you crazy, Jad? I mean—"

"The Grand Council is in charge of deciding if I'm crazy," I said. "Oddly enough, the entire Council appears to be gathered here. But we can rest assured there's an explanation for that. Now, my question?"

"Imperiality," said Mara, "he—that murderer—refuses to follow your commands, even your most direct and specific commands." She gave me a shrewd glance, then demanded of the others, "Does anyone say otherwise? No? All agree, Imperiality."

Ganion said, "You called him 'assassin.' This would suppose someone sent him to kill Beramis."

"Yes," I said, "I suppose it does. But can you tell me what's supposed to happen when he has his say? Will he really tell us why? Or is something else planned?"

I raised my voice. "Quickly, assassin, tell us all you know!"

Rina's shout alerted me, sent Deak and Ganion into a headlong dive at another bystander who had suddenly pulled out a disruptor pistol. Deak seized the man's arm in a vicelike grip, forced it back until he dropped the pistol. It clattered noisily on the floor.

"You get the wrong signal?" Deak demanded. He scooped up the pistol and brandished it wildly. "Talk!"

"Give the disruptor to Susa to hold," I said. "Put the safety on

first."

"I've got that much sense, Jad—uh, damn!—Your Imperiality." He handed the weapon over. "Now what?"

I was at a loss. "What do you suggest, Quent?"

"Hmm. Well, in the first place, we're starting to run out of assassin-holders." More loudly, he said, "I should say, Imperiality, that the next time somebody pulls out a weapon, the bystanders had better grab him. If they don't, Mara and Susa are going to start shooting, and with their aim, a lot of people, including the Grand Council, are going to get hit."

"*Especially* the Grand Council," put in Mara. I could see she had all picked up on the strangeness of the Counsellors' presence. "I wonder, Imperiality," she continued, "just why the Council is gathered here, why your guards haven't arrived yet even after a disruptor blast and several loud screams, and who is responsible for arranging this."

"And Beramis?" I asked, somehow keeping my voice from breaking.

"His death must be part of the same plot."

I thought a moment, then spoke to the arched ceiling. "Monitoring crew, relay this to my guards. I want them here, now, without weapons, I repeat, *without weapons*. Mara, the woman with the disruptor pistol and the blond hair, is temporarily their commander. They are to do as she instructs. Understand?"

A second later, a low-powered laser locked onto my right retina and flashed an acknowledgement: GUARDS ADVISED. It stayed in my line of sight as an after-image for a good minute.

Now, to get to the heart of this plot.

I said, "What were you saying, Jon?"

"I think this goes even deeper than it seems. This *ert*," he said, giving the a shake, "was to have been killed by that one." He bared his teeth in a humorless grin as his captive suddenly paled. "What's wrong, assassin? Did you just realize you'd been set up? But there's more than Beramis's murder… "

"I didn't!" the gasped. "His Imperiality told me—"

"I told you to shut up," I said. I saw, then, why so many High Emperors had gone insane of late. The Grand Council had been responsible. Like any bureaucracy, it had been taking on more and more power at every opportunity… and what better way to keep gaining power than to drive Emperors insane? Their final intention, I thought, would be discrediting so many High Emperors that the very institution was destroyed. Then the Council could easily step in to run things.

I couldn't be the first to say it, or they'd have reason to throw me out of office: insanity due to paranoia.

From the expression on Jon's face, I saw he understood, too.

I smiled. "Tell me what you're thinking, Jon."

And he did, in short, blunt, angry words. He accused the Grand Council of everything short of murdering me. All the time, I looked on sagely.

"Preposterous!" snorted Grand Counsellor Alderman. He took a stately step forward. "Madness." Another. "How can you even think such a—"

"Grand Counsellor," Mara said, "I think that if you get any closer, His Imperiality's temporary commander of his guard is going to blast you."

Alderman shut up and took a quick step back.

In a moment, a small squad of uniformed guards pushed their way though the crowd and saluted me. The holsters for their disruptor pistols were empty.

"Search the crowd for weapons," I said quickly. "I want to know if we have any more assassins hiding among us."

"Outrageous!" shouted Counsellor Alderman.

"Start with him," Mara said.

"Get your hands off me!" Alderman said, as several guards began going through his pockets. "It's unheard of to assault a Grand Counsellor!"

"Sir." One of the searchers pulled a small weapon from his pocket and held it up for me to see.

"This is pretty unheard of, too," I said. "Needle-pistol, isn't it, Counsellor?"

"I can explain—"

"Don't bother," I said. "Jon?"

"As for the technique, it appears quite simple: making the High Emperor as word-bound as the Bureaucracy itself, until the Emperor is locked into a fear-pattern regarding his speech. That is, he becomes afraid to speak lest he accidentally get himself or a close friend killed. The pressure simply drives him mad. And, if he does figure out what's going on—that the plot is turning his every word against him—then the Grand Council can rule him insane due to paranoia."

"Indeed," I said.

"Nonsense!" snapped Alderman. "If that gun-waving woman will permit me?" At Mara's nod, he went on: "His Imperiality incautiously ordered someone to stop that unfortunate young there. So, in his haste to obey, for the High Emperor's every word is absolute law, this man pulled out his disruptor—"

"Which he just happened to be carrying?" said Jon. "And at the Imperial Coronation Ball? And then another of your assassins just happens to be ready to blast him?"

“Clearly a function such as this, even here, must have some armed men in unobtrusive attendance,” Alderman said.

“These are things which you from the more backward corners of the Imperium cannot be expected to understand, of course. But, needless to say, when the first gunman went so far as to try to blame the Emperor himself for—”

“Shut your lying face,” growled Quent. “You set up this bloody-handed killer to get Beramis, and you set up that one to shut the first murderer up afterwards, and then you had a gun yourself, just in case.”

“Insanity,” hissed Alderman. He raised his voice, shouted, “Madness.” He turned to the rest of the watching Grand Council. “Colleagues of the Council, it is just as I feared; now we must consider the matter of the fitness of His Imperiality. All this talk of wild plots by the bureaucracy—”

“Counsellor!” gasped Mara. “Jad, what shall—”

I moved slowly toward Alderman and the Council, motioning Mara aside. “Now, if a High Emperor from a backward corner of the Imperium may make a small observation?”

Alderman edged back nervously.

“Leaving aside the matter of the killer, who appears extraordinarily and literally obedient one moment and quite unable to take orders the next; leaving aside the matter of the second gunman, who wants to defend My Imperiality even before I’ve been blamed for anything—” I continued to advance, step by step, slowly herding Alderman in a broad loop. We moved through the Grand Counsellors, who scrambled aside to give him room. “—and leaving aside the question of whether you were close enough to hear exactly what I said, the observation I would like to make is that I haven’t said a word about any plots by you, the Bureaucracy, the Grand Council, or anyone else.” I paused a heartbeat, just long enough for Alderman to begin to hope. *“Yet.”*

I noticed that the guards had finished their search of the immediate crowd: no more weapons. Ahead of me, behind the still-retreating Alderman, I saw Rina mourning over Beramis’s body. Grimly, I maneuvered the Grand Counsellor toward the corpse.

I said, “I think the captain of the guard should be summoned next, if I want more answers. I’m sure he knows what, or who, kept the guards so long.”

“Y-Your Imperiality,” said Counsellor Alderman, face grown quite pale, “we, uh, we meant no harm, but Your Imperiality must be made to, uh, must realize the responsibilities of omnipotence and infallibility and—and—”

“You’d better stop backing up,” I said. “You’re about to step on a

dead man."

Alderman looked back and saw Beramis lying there, all crumpled, on the floor of the great ballroom. Beyond the corpse, Rina rose to her feet.

I turned to Mara. "Have our two assassins brought over here." Then I turned back to Grand Counsellor Alderman and took a deep breath. "So," I said, shifting to my lecturing voice, "you would have me infallible and omnipotent? You would have one obey my words rather than my meaning, and a second commit murder to protect my infallibility? You would, then, if you do not drive me mad, make me into the image of the Bureaucracy, bound by words and rules instead of meaning and reality? Well?"

Grand Counsellor Alderman recoiled a step. His foot touched Beramis's body. He jerked away. "Yes, Y-Your Imperiality."

"So be it," I said. I pointed to Beramis. "Now, bring him back to life."

"Im-Imperiality?" said Alderman. "I don't understand."

"Your murderer didn't understand before; did that stop him?"

"But—"

I turned to the two captured assassins. "Bring my friend back to life," I said. "I order it."

"But that's impossible!" the first assassin whispered.

"Am I not omnipotent? Am I not infallible? Show us all how omnipotent and infallible I really am by carrying out my orders."

I found a guard close at hand and motioned him forward.

"Your Imperiality," he said, dropping to one knee.

"You will attend to these three," I said, "making sure they take neither food nor drink nor sleep until they have fulfilled their task." I waited, eyes on the guard.

"Your Imperiality, have I permission to ask a question?"

"Any order authorizes one to ask for its meaning."

"Do we… are we to attend in shifts, or…?"

"I leave it up to you."

My gaze swept over the group of Grand Counsellors. Teren al Axtant dropped to one knee, head bowed. Others, evidently unsure whether to go up or down, half crouched, watching me.

I said to Axtant, to them all, "I think you cannot judge My Imperiality's sanity unless you also investigate plots against My Imperiality. You may start with this current plot. You will attend these three, as part of your investigation, until they succeed in their task or die."

"Yes, Imperiality." Axtant took a deep breath. "How shall we attend them? In the same manner as the guards?"

"Select a suitable system."

The Grand Counsellor got stiffly to his feet. “As you command, Imperiality. But how did Your Imperiality and Your Imperiality’s friends discover Alderman’s plot?”

“Oh, that.” I made a deprecating gesture. “The Bureaucracy dates only from the Spaceflight Era. The institution of the High Emperor is but a few centuries old, the Grand Council less than that. Neither has any real experience in intrigue and conspiracy and assassination.”

“But you?”

“Us?” Mara swept up to my side. “We have forty-nine centuries of experience to draw on. As for Alderman and his hirelings… ”

“Your Imperiality, please!” It was the second gunman. He was on his knees, begging. “We can’t bring him back. Please, Your—”

“You can die trying,” I said. I turned away, started to walk. “Come,” I said to my friends. “We’ve still got work to do.”

Once clear of the guards, Grand Counsellors, and bystanders, I began to plan aloud: “My every word being taken literally has got to stop. Jon, wasn’t there some old formula kings used when speaking for the record? ‘I have spoken,’ or something like that? And Mara’s going to need some help with the guard for a while; maybe Quent and Rina. Then I think there are going to be some vacancies on the Grand Council. We’re going to get that reorganized, too. For all the mess it’s caused, I still need it.” I walked on, oblivious to those around me, to the vast room that spread in all directions. “It isn’t power that corrupts; it’s being beyond punishment. But there’s no sense worrying, is there, not when—”

“Jad,” said Rina.

“What?” I said. I stopped and the others eddied around me. I saw her then, face haggard but eyes dry now.

“You’re in shock,” she said.

“Nonsense,” I said. “I’m all right. It’s just—just—Oh, Rina, he’s dead. Beramis is—dead!”

And I, My Imperiality, High Emperor Jad the First, wept at last.

PLATO'S BASTARDS, by James C. Stewart

The subject freaked out today.

It happened in a plastic little restaurant tacked onto the back of one of those big box stores, the kind with the *faux* wood tables and uncomfortable orange-red seats that look as though they've been ripped off from some fast food franchise.

At first calmly eating breakfast (the same breakfast he has everyday, what the menu calls The Standard: two eggs, three slices of bacon, potatoes, toast and coffee), he'd been making notes in a small purple book, scribbling lines about politics, disagreeing with this or that on some point of strategy.

The place was Wednesday morning quiet; a couple of blue hairs nattering over tea, the subject, and me. The subject—John, I guess I'll call him—became increasingly agitated. Eventually his head snapped up, glancing around with panicked eyes, pushing his plate away without finishing. At first I thought maybe he was suffering from some sort of gastric anomaly, but none of the gut-clenching or washroom-fleeing one normally associates with this kind of thing occurred. And John's behavior became even more erratic. For an instant I thought maybe he'd realized the problem, saw the hole, the bleed…

He slapped a few bucks down on the table, hurriedly making for the exit, scurrying into the store proper.

Seemingly unnoticed I followed, the subtle restaurant dim giving way to the store's harsh overhead fluorescents. John seemed to be wandering without purpose, without examining the store's plethora of products, muttering to himself under his breath. I was concerned a passerby might think he was a lunatic and call the police, or at the very least, store security.

Behind me the store's restaurant construct dammed, linear time ceasing. The waitress and the blue hairs statued, frozen into the moment when the dam hit. John remained blissfully ignorant, unaware of the happenings in his wake.

A voice in my ear urged discretionary speed, listing the resources consumed to maintain the constant construct dam, reminding me John's ignorance was necessary to the integrity of the experiment.

John, looking like a bum in his ratty overcoat, meandered into a maze of shelves, momentarily lost in stacks packed with plastic toys, a distracting animated promo running on a twelve-inch screen angled overhead.

He stopped in front of a display shelf jammed with the newest

action figure, a disturbing toy tagged Occupying Sam. It stood three feet high, replete with M-16 and desert fatigues. Some imaginative stock boy had twisted the moveable plastic parts into a combat stance. A nearby box claimed the thing "really speaks!"

John gave a little chuckle, and felt for the switch. The toy's voice came surprisingly clear and realistic, commanding; none of the scratchy G.I. Joe sounds from the past, "*Do you have your papers? Let me see your papers*."

John stared at it, no longer smiling, shaking his head. He placed the toy back on the shelf, mentally chalking it up as another in a long line of signposts on the declining road of western civilization.

Overhead an echo crackled static, "Good morning, shoppers. There's a red light special on torsine, torsine derivatives and synthetic torsites in the pharmaceutical section. Please have your insurance cards and government documents ready at the checkout counter. Thank you."

John continued muttering to himself, but started toward the red light special. I kept far enough back to avoid his wide-eyed, scattered gaze.

We wandered through women's lingerie and women's shoes. We drifted into the electronics department. John stopped in front of a vast screen displaying grim scenes from the occupation. He faced it, silhouetted, gesturing at a black hooded form standing over a blindfolded, kneeling man. The dark figure flashed a long knife. John didn't stick around to see how the scene played out.

We strayed into the Homeland Security section. Above us yet another television prattled on about the various threats to the nation, God and our families, reminding everyone the Threat Level was now at Orange, just a click away from the Dread Red.

I tried to remember a time when there hadn't been a Threat Level.

The shelves stocked duct tape (for sealing windows in case of chemical attack), freeze-dried goods and bottled water. A uniformed security guard wearing an American flag armband stood next to a counter displaying handguns and Pro-Life pamphlets.

John kept glancing at him, talking madness, his hands batting at the air about his head. Thank God the dam hit before the hard-faced guard had a chance to call for back up.

I took out my purple notebook and jotted a few lines regarding some of these intriguing mannerisms. John's case was completely unique, and the bleed was producing several interesting effects. I read my earlier entry: Sept. 21. Breakfast at the Big Box Restaurant. The Standard. Eggs too runny. Ask for them over-easy they come like snot. Ask for them over-medium they come like rock—

I kept ahead of the construct dam. The National Security section

gave way to automotive parts. John made a weird little zag, zigging behind a shelf stocked with massive pistons, disappearing. I followed suit.

Behind the shelf a hallway lined with large unopened boxes and lit by a wire-meshed bulb. The floor was gray concrete littered with old advertising flyers and flattened cardboard. I guessed it to be some sort of staff access passage. I spotted John about halfway down its length, his shadow elongating beneath the unnatural light. He headed for an orange swinging door, a door which looked as though it had been repeatedly battered by forklifts.

The doors still swung when I reached them. The light dimmed considerably, bordering on dark.

The space I entered was football field large. The floor, still dirty concrete, was cluttered with tables, around each a tightly packed group of silently working people.

John had apparently vanished.

I walked along an aisle, moving deeper into the warehouse, glimpsing the hospital masked workers and their labors. Some weaved designer shirts. Some attached plastic soles to designer shoes. Some packed Bibles into boxes labeled in Arabic markings. Some assembled pistols and automatic weapons. Some sweated over crude dynamite bombs. I watched a man with missing fingers carefully attach a timer. White signs demanded 'TOTAL SILENCE' in big black letters. Still, I couldn't find John.

I passed a glass room, inside another table, radiation suits delicately piecing together a strange metallic device about the size of a television set. Their foreman, done in the spectacularly real guise of a so-called "gray alien", drank cola and smoked a cigarette in a clearly marked No Smoking area. No one seemed to care.

Finally I came to the back wall of the warehouse. Following its long length, I eventually spotted a closet-sized door hidden among a forest of acrylic Christmas trees.

I opened the door and entered another dimly lit hallway, this one narrow. It cornered, spilling into a darkened, forgotten storage space. Mannequins sported faded fashions; outdated toys smiled though a child's hand had never touched them; ancient advertisements beckoned with impossibly low prices. The place was a sort of time capsule, an odd collection of consumer nostalgia marooned in a dirty corner caught outside of time. Not even the construct dam could effect it—for all intents and purposes, the space had already been dammed.

I searched for an exit, finally discovering one behind a garish shoe rack from the 1970s. The door was wider than the last, hard to push open. Something was blocking it on the other side. Again the voice in my ear, the miniature speaker cautioning…the reality tear

was becoming unmanageable, the resources allocated extending beyond budgetary parameters. The voice advised the coordinates would be severed if the problem wasn't soon dealt with…

I put my shoulder against the door, pushing hard, forcing movement. A dusty beam of light bled through.

A crowd, a cacophony of urgent voices. I wormed my way through the crack, joining the mob. The door closed behind me and became a shelf stocked with antacids.

I was in the pharmaceutical section, packed in among a hundred or so individuals chaotically trying to take advantage of the red light torsine special. I spotted John, already in line, his ID vise-clutched in his hand. To the store's credit the queue was moving relatively rapidly.

The pharmacy was bright whites and hanging, banner-style adverts, some pushing trademarked Sailing Away brand torsine. To my right was a wall stacked floor to ceiling with tampons, and to my left, a triple-paned window into the cold and bleak. I couldn't see outside though, the view was eclipsed by faces, gaunt faces, the huddled masses, stark and staring in at the products they couldn't have. A hauntingly sad-eyed little girl caught my attention, not looking at the candy just out of reach, not looking at the riot, but looking at me. It was disconcerting. I turned away, turned to the overhead and ever-present television, to the soothing cathode fire. A news announcer spoke, his words barely heard over the din, a demented monologue riding the heedless, dissonant soundscape, "… *and it was impossible to unfold to the people the conspiracy against church and country, to expose them to the secret doctrines—there would have been panic in the streets. It would have meant initiating the multitude, it would have meant lifting the veil of Isis. The only recourse was to find denouncers and false witnesses…easily done, of course. When the temporal, spiritual and political tyrannies unite to crush a victim they never want for serviceable instruments…*"

And then it was my turn at the counter, a mean-faced clerk wearing a sidearm and a blue cross on his government-issue ball cap asked for my ID. I passed it to him. He swiped my card through a scanner, the machine beeped its approval. He passed it back, sliding a pair of happy, colorfully stickered ampoules across the counter. His blank eyes looked through me, "Next."

I turned and was immediately swallowed by the crowd. Tossed, bounced and jostled, I was finally ejected into the adjoining books and magazines section. I thought I heard someone at my ear, a familiar voice, but then it was gone, replaced by a buzz, a fuzz—a fly perhaps.

I browsed magazines not really seeing the pages. Eventually a young clerk approached, her cheeks cartoonishly rouged, gingerly

touching my arm, “Is there something I can help you with, sir?”

Her voice reminded me of Mickey Mouse. I found myself staring at a copy of *Guns & Ammo*, a concept I didn’t really grip until I put the magazine back on the shelf.

“No. Thanks.”

I walked out of the section.

In my pocket the ampoules clinked a cadence. It occurred to me there’d been a time before Sailing Away, a time before the pharmaceutical corporations. You had to give it to them, they’d been clever…prescriptions for synth-torsine called anything but synth-torsine, kickbacks to doctors ensuring complicity. They’d given the shit a legion of names: Poxacet, Dracson, Eulliud, Semoral. They have at their disposal a population so distracted by the loud flashing noises they don’t even know what they’re taking. “Painkillers” for that broken leg. “Painkillers” for that back ache. “Painkillers” after that accident. “What? You’re all out of Tacaset and now you feel sick? Here’s another prescription…I’m sure it’ll help.”

Smile. Touch the arm. Hey, trust your mechanic.

There was that buzz at my ear again. Someone said, “Severed.” I turned to see who’d addressed me, turned to see…

Nobody.

The buzz continued, an odd bit of static with the slightest trace of an echo. I batted at the air around my head—anyone watching would’ve thought me a madman.

I floated along one of the store’s main arteries, aiming myself toward the dreary plastic restaurant tacked onto the back.

The place was quiet; a couple of old ladies and a man in an overcoat similar to mine. He openly stared.

A human gnome in the store’s clashing colors served breakfast. The Standard. I took out my little purple book, noting the sorry state of the meal: Sept. 21. Breakfast at the Big Box Restaurant. The Standard. Eggs too runny. Ask for them over-easy they come like snot. Ask for them over-medium they come like rock—

The buzz interrupted, startlingly loud this time, almost a voice but not quite. I pushed my plate away. I glanced around, panicked. The man in the overcoat similar to mine furrowed his brow in confusion. I fished in a pocket and left money on the table, the restaurant shrinking around me. I started to sweat, my shirt sticking to my skin. I wandered out of the restaurant’s subtle dim, back into the store’s harsh overhead fluorescents…

And I couldn’t shake the feeling someone was following me.

PEN PAL, by Milton Lesser

The best that could be said for Matilda Penshaws was that she was something of a paradox. She was thirty-three years old, certainly not aged when you consider the fact that the female life expectancy is now up in the sixties, but the lines were beginning to etch their permanent paths across her face, and now she needed certain remedial undergarments at which she would have scoffed ten or even five years ago. Matilda was also looking for a husband.

This, in itself, was not unusual—but Matilda was so completely wrapped up in the romantic fallacy of her day that she sought a Prince Charming, a faithful Don Juan, a man who had been everywhere and tasted of every worldly pleasure and who now wanted to sit on a porch and talk about it all to Matilda.

The fact that in all probability such a man did not exist disturbed Matilda not in the least. She had been known to say that there are over a billion men in the world, a goodly percentage of whom are eligible bachelors, and that the right one would come along simply because she had been waiting for him.

Matilda, you see, had patience.

She also had a fetish. Matilda had received her A. B. from exclusive Ursula Johns College, and Radcliffe had yielded her Masters degree, yet Matilda was an avid follower of the pen-pal columns. She would read them carefully and then read them again, looking for the masculine names which, through a system known only to Matilda, had an affinity to her own. To the gentlemen to whom these names were affixed, Matilda would write, and she often told her mother, the widow Penshaws, that it was in this way she would find her husband. The widow Penshaws impatiently told her to go out and get dates.

That particular night, Matilda pulled her battered old sedan into the garage and walked up the walk to the porch. The widow Penshaws was rocking on the glider, and Matilda said hello.

The first thing the widow Penshaws did was to take Matilda's left hand in her own and examine the next-to-the-last finger.

"I thought so," she said. "I knew this was coming when I saw that look in your eye at dinner. Where is Herman's engagement ring?"

Matilda smiled. "It wouldn't have worked out, Ma. He was too darned stuffy. I gave him his ring and said thanks anyway, and he smiled politely and said he wished I had told him sooner because his fifteenth college reunion was this week end and he had already turned down the invitation.

The widow Penshaws nodded regretfully. "That was thoughtful of Herman to hide his feelings."

"Hogwash!" said her daughter. "He has no true feelings. He's sorry that he had to miss his college reunion. That's all he has to hide. A stuffy Victorian prude and even less of a man than the others."

"But, Matilda, that's your fifth broken engagement in three years. It ain't that you ain't popular, but you just don't want to cooperate. You don't *fall* in love, Matilda—no one does. Love osmoses into you slowly, without your even knowing, and it keeps growing all the time."

Matilda admired her mother's use of the word "osmoses," but she found nothing which was not objectionable about being unaware of the impact of love. She said good night and went upstairs, climbed out of her light summer dress, and took a cold shower.

She began to hum to herself. She had not yet seen the pen-pal section of the current *Literary Review,* and because the subject matter of that magazine was somewhat high-brow and cosmopolitan, she could expect a gratifying selection of pen pals.

She shut off the shower, brushed her teeth, gargled, patted herself dry with a towel, and jumped into bed, careful to lock the door of her bedroom. She dared not let the widow Penshaws know that she slept in the nude; the widow Penshaws would object to a girl's sleeping in the nude, even if the nearest neighbor was three hundred yards away.

Matilda switched her bed lamp on and dabbed some citronella on each ear lobe and a little droplet on her chin (how she hated insects!). Then she propped up her pillows—two pillows partially stopped her postnasal drip—and took the latest issue of the Literary Review off the night table.

She flipped through the pages and came to Personals. Someone in Nebraska wanted to trade match books; someone in New York needed a Midwestern pen pal, but it was a woman; an elderly man interested in ornithology wanted a young chick correspondent interested in the same subject; a young, personable man wanted an editorial position because he thought he had something to offer the editorial world; and —

Matilda read the next one twice. Then she held it close to the light and read it again. The *Literary Review* was one of the few magazines that printed the name of the advertiser rather than a box number, and Matilda even liked the sound of the name. But mostly, she had to admit to herself, it was the flavor of the wording. This very well could be *it.* Or, that is, *him.*

> Intelligent, somewhat egotistical male who's really been around, whose universal experience can make the average cosmopolite look like a provincial hick, is in need of several female correspondents: must be intelligent, have gumption,

be capable of listening to male who has a lot to say and wants to say it. All others need not apply. Wonderful opportunity cultural experience… Haron Gorka, Cedar Falls, Ill.

The man was egotistical, all right; Matilda could see that. But she had never minded an egotistical man, at least not when he had something about which he had a genuine reason to be egotistical. The man sounded as though he would have reason indeed. He wanted only the best because he was the best. Like calls to like.

The name—Haron Gorka: its oddness was somehow beautiful to Matilda. Haron Gorka—the nationality could be anything. And that was it. He had no nationality, for all intents and purposes; he was an international man, a figure among figures, a paragon…

Matilda sighed happily as she put out the light. The moon shone in through the window brightly, and at such times Matilda generally would get up, go to the cupboard, pull out a towel, take two hairpins from her powder drawer, pin the towel to the screen of her window, and hence keep the disturbing moonlight from her eyes. But this time it did not disturb her, and she would let it shine. Cedar Falls was a small town not fifty miles from her home, and she'd get there a hop, skip, and jump ahead of her competitors, simply by arriving in person instead of—writing a letter.

Matilda was not yet that far gone in years or appearance. Dressed properly, she could hope to make a favorable impression in person, and she felt it was important to beat the influx of mail to Cedar Falls.

Matilda got out of bed at seven, tiptoed into the bathroom, showered with a merest wary trickle of water, tiptoed back into her bedroom, dressed in her very best cotton over the finest of uplifting and figure-molding underthings, made sure her stocking seams were perfectly straight, brushed her suede shoes, admired herself in the mirror, read the ad again, wished for a moment she were a bit younger, and tiptoed downstairs.

The widow Penshaws met her at the bottom of the stair well.

"Mother," gasped Matilda. Matilda always gasped when she saw something unexpected. "What on earth are you doing up?"

The widow Penshaws smiled somewhat toothlessly, having neglected to put in both her uppers and lowers this early in the morning. "I'm fixing breakfast, of course…"

Then the widow Penshaws told Matilda that she could never hope to sneak about the house without her mother's knowing about it, and that even if she were going out in response to one of those foolish ads in the magazines, she would still need a good breakfast to start with, such as only mother could cook. Matilda moodily thanked the widow

Penshaws.

Driving the fifty miles to Cedar Falls in a little less than an hour, Matilda hummed Mendelssohn's Wedding March all the way. It was her favorite piece of music. Once, she told herself: Matilda Penshaws, you are being premature about the whole thing. But she laughed and thought that if she was, she was, and, meanwhile, she could only get to Cedar Falls and find out.

And so she got there.

The man in the wire cage at the Cedar Falls post office was a stereotype. Matilda always liked to think in terms of stereotypes. This man was small, roundish, florid of face, with a pair of eyeglasses that hung too far down on his nose. Matilda knew he would peer over his glasses and answer questions grudgingly.

"Hello," said Matilda.

The stereotype grunted and peered at her over his glasses. Matilda asked him where she could find Haron Gorka.

"What?"

"I said, where can I find Haron Gorka?"

"Is that in the United States?"

"It's not a *that*; it's a *he*. Where can I find him? Where does he live? What's the quickest way to get there?"

The stereotype pushed up his glasses and looked at her squarely. "Now take it easy, ma'am. First place, I don't know any Haron Gorka —"

Matilda kept the alarm from creeping into her voice. She muttered an *oh* under her breath and took out the ad. This she showed to the stereotype, and he scratched his bald head. Then he told Matilda, almost happily, that he was sorry he couldn't help her. He grudgingly suggested that if it really was important, she might check with the police.

Matilda did, only they didn't know any Haron Gorka, either. It turned out that no one did. Matilda tried the general store, the fire department, the city hall, the high school, all three Cedar Falls gas stations, the livery stable, and half a dozen private dwellings at random. As far as the gentry of Cedar Falls were concerned, Haron Gorka did not exist.

Matilda felt bad, but she had no intention of returning home this early. If she could not find Haron Gorka, that was one thing; but she knew that she'd rather not return home and face the widow Penshaws, at least not for a while yet. The widow Penshaws meant well, but she liked to analyze other people's mistakes, especially Matilda's.

Accordingly, Matilda trudged wearily toward Cedar Falls' small and unimposing library. She could release some of her pent-up aggression by browsing through the dusty stacks.

This she did, but it was unrewarding. Cedar Falls had what might be called a microscopic library, and Matilda thought that if this small building were filled with microfilm rather than books, the library still would be lacking. Hence she retraced her steps and nodded to the old librarian as she passed.

Then Matilda frowned. Twenty years from now, this could be Matilda Penshaws—complete with plain gray dress, rimless spectacles, gray hair, suspicious eyes, and a broomstick figure…

On the other hand—why not? Why couldn't the librarian help her? Why hadn't she thought of it before? Certainly a man as well educated as Haron Gorka would be an avid reader, and unless he had a permanent residence here in Cedar Falls, one couldn't expect that he'd have his own library with him. This being the case, a third-rate collection of books was far better than no collection at all, and perhaps the librarian would know Mr. Haron Gorka.

Matilda cleared her throat. "Pardon me," she began. "I'm looking for—"

"Haron Gorka." The librarian nodded.

"How on earth did you know?"

"That's easy. You're the sixth young woman who came here inquiring about that man today. Six of you—five others in the morning, and now you in the afternoon. I never did trust this Mr. Gorka…"

Matilda jumped as if she had been struck strategically from the rear. "You know him? You know Haron Gorka?"

"Certainly. Of course I know him. He's our steadiest reader here at the library. Not a week goes by that he doesn't take out three, four books. Scholarly gentleman, but not without charm. If I were twenty years younger—"

Matilda thought a little flattery might be effective. "Only ten," she assured the librarian. "Ten years would be more than sufficient, I'm sure."

"Are you? Well. Well, well." The librarian did something with the back of her hair, but it looked just as it had before. "Maybe you're right. Maybe you're right, at that." Then she sighed. "But I guess a miss is as good as a mile."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean anyone would like to correspond with Haron Gorka. Or to know him well. To be considered his friend. Haron Gorka…"

The librarian seemed about to soar off into the air someplace, and if five women had been here first, Matilda was now definitely in a hurry.

"Um, where can I find Mr. Gorka?"

"I'm not supposed to do this, you know. We're not permitted to

give the addresses of any of our people. Against regulations, my dear."

"What about the other five women?"

"They convinced me that I ought to give them his address."

Matilda reached into her pocketbook and withdrew a five-dollar bill.

"Was this the way?" she demanded. Matilda was not very good at this sort of thing.

The librarian shook her head.

Matilda nodded shrewdly and added a twin brother to the bill in her hand. "Then is this better?"

"That's worse. I wouldn't take your money—"

"Sorry. What, then?"

"If I can't enjoy an association with Haron Gorka directly, I still could get the vicarious pleasure of your contact with him. Report to me faithfully, and you'll get his address. That's what the other five will do, and with half a dozen of you, I'll get an over-all picture. Each one of you will tell me about Haron Gorka, sparing no details. You each have a distinct personality, of course, and it will color each picture considerably. But with six of you reporting, I should receive my share of vicarious enjoyment. Is it—ah—a deal?"

Matilda assured her that it was and, breathlessly, wrote down the address. She thanked the librarian and then went out to her car, whistling to herself.

Haron Gorka lived in what could have been an agrarian estate, except that the land no longer was being tilled. The house itself had fallen to ruin. This surprised Matilda, but she did not let it keep her spirits in check. Haron Gorka, the man, was what counted, and the librarian's account of him certainly had been glowing enough. Perhaps he was too busy with his cultural pursuits to pay any real attention to his dwelling. That was it, of course: the conspicuous show of wealth or personal industry meant nothing at all to Haron Gorka. Matilda liked him all the more for it.

There were five cars parked in the long driveway, and now Matilda's made the sixth. In spite of herself, she smiled. She had not been the only one with the idea of visiting Haron Gorka in person. With half a dozen of them there, the laggards who resorted to posting letters would be left far behind. Matilda congratulated herself for what she thought had been her ingenuity and which now turned out to be something that she had in common with five other women. You live and learn, thought Matilda. And then, quite annoyedly, she berated herself for not having been the first. Perhaps the other five all were satisfactory; perhaps she wouldn't be needed; perhaps she was too late…

As it turned out, she wasn't. Not only that, she was welcomed

with open arms. Not by Haron Gorka; that she really might have liked. Instead, someone she could only regard as a menial met her, and when he asked if she had come in response to the advertisement, she nodded eagerly. He told her that was fine and ushered her straight into a room that evidently was to be her living quarters. It contained a small, undersized bed, a table, and a chair, and, near a little slot in the wall, there was a button.

"You want any food or drink," the servant told her, "and you just press that button. The results will surprise you."

"What about Mr. Gorka?"

"When he wants you, he will send for you. Meanwhile, make yourself to home, lady, and I will tell him you are here."

A little doubtful, now, Matilda thanked him and watched him leave. He closed the door softly behind his retreating feet, but Matilda's ears had not missed the ominous click. She ran to the door and tried to open it, but it would not budge. It was locked—from the outside.

It must be said to Matilda's credit that she sobbed only once. After that, she realized that what is done is done, and here, past thirty, she wasn't going to be girlishly timid about it. Besides, it was not her fault if, in his unconcern, Haron Gorka had unwittingly hired a neurotic servant.

For a time Matilda paced back and forth in her room, and of what was going on outside she could hear nothing. In that case, she would pretend that there was nothing outside the little room, and presently she lay down on the bed to take a nap. This didn't last long, however: she had a nightmare in which Haron Gorka appeared as a giant with two heads, but, upon awaking with a start, she immediately ascribed that to her overwrought nerves.

At that point she remembered what the servant had said about food, and she thought at once of the supreme justice she could do to a juicy beefsteak. Well, maybe they didn't have a beefsteak. In that case, she would take what they had, and, accordingly, she walked to the little slot in the wall and pressed the button.

She heard the whir of machinery. A moment later there was a soft sliding sound. Through the slot first came a delicious aroma, followed almost instantly by a tray. On the tray were a bowl of turtle soup, mashed potatoes, green peas, bread, a strange cocktail, root beer, a parfait—and a thick tenderloin sizzling in hot butter sauce.

Matilda gasped once and felt about to gasp again—but by then her salivary glands were working overtime, and she ate her meal. The fact that it was precisely what she would have wanted could, of course, be attributed to coincidence, and the further fact that everything was extremely palatable made her forget all about Haron

Gorka's neurotic servant.

When she finished her meal a pleasant lethargy possessed her, and in a little while Matilda was asleep again. This time she did not dream at all. It was a deep sleep and a restful one, and when she awoke it was with the wonderful feeling that everything was all right.

The feeling did not last long. Standing over her was Haron Gorka's servant, and he said, "Mr. Gorka will see you now."

"Now?"

"Now. That's what you're here for, isn't it?"

He had a point there, but Matilda hardly had time even to fix her hair. She told the servant so.

"Miss," he replied, "I assure you it will not matter in the least to Haron Gorka. You are here and he is ready to see you and that is all that matters."

"You sure?" Matilda wanted to take no chances.

"Yes. Come."

She followed him out of the little room and across what should have been a spacious dining area, except that everything seemed covered with dust. Of the other women Matilda could see nothing, and she suddenly realized that each of them probably had a cubicle of a room like her own, and that each, in turn, had already had her first visit with Haron Gorka. Well, then, she must see to it that she impressed him better than did all the rest; and later, when she returned to tell the old librarian of her adventures, she could perhaps draw her out and compare notes.

She would not admit even to herself that she was disappointed with Haron Gorka. It was not that he was homely and unimpressive; it was just that he was so ordinary-looking. She would almost have preferred the monster of her dreams.

He wore a white linen suit and had mousy hair, drab eyes, an almost Roman nose, a petulant mouth with the slight arch of the egotist at each corner.

He said, "Greetings. You have come—"

"In response to your ad. How do you do, Mr. Gorka?"

She hoped she wasn't being too formal. But then, there was no sense assuming that he would like informality. She could only wait and see and adjust her own actions to suit him. Meanwhile, it would be best to keep in the middle of the road.

"I am fine. Are you ready?"

"Ready?"

"Certainly. You came in response to my ad. You want to hear me talk, do you not?"

"I—do." Matilda had had visions of her Prince Charming sitting back and relaxing with her, telling her of the many things he had done

and seen. But first she certainly would have liked to get to *know* the man. Well, Haron Gorka obviously had more experience along these lines than she did. He waited, however, as if wondering what to say, and Matilda, accustomed to social chatter, gave him a gambit.

"I must admit I was surprised when I got exactly what I wanted for dinner," she told him brightly.

"Eh? What say? Oh, yes, naturally. A combination of telepathy and teleportation. The synthetic cookery is attuned to your mind when you press the buzzer, and the strength of your psychic impulses determines how closely the meal will adjust to your desires. The fact that the adjustment here was near perfect is commendable. It means either that you have a high *psi* quotient or that you were very hungry."

"Yes," said Matilda vaguely. Perhaps it might be better, after all, if Haron Gorka were to talk to her as he saw fit.

"Ready?"

"Uh—ready."

"Well?"

"Well what, Mr. Gorka?"

"What would you like me to talk about?"

"Oh, anything."

"Please. As the ad read, my universal experience—is universal. Literally. You'll have to be more specific."

"Well, why don't you tell me about some of your far travels? Unfortunately, while I've done a lot of reading, I haven't been to all the places I would have liked—"

"Good enough. You know, of course, how frigid Deneb VII is?"

Matilda said, "Beg pardon?"

"Well, there was the time our crew—before I had retired, of course—made a crash landing there. We could survive in the vac suits, of course, but the *thiomots* were after us almost at once. They go mad over plastic. They will eat absolutely any sort of plastic. Our vac suits —"

"—were made of plastic," Matilda suggested. She did not understand a thing he was talking about, but she felt she should act bright.

"No, no. Must you interrupt? The air hose and the water feed, those were plastic. Not the rest of the suit. The point is that half of us were destroyed before the rescue ship could come, and the remainder were near death. I owe my life to the mimicry of a *flaak* from Capella III. It assumed the properties of plastic and led the *thiomots* a merry chase across the frozen surface of D VII. You travel in the Deneb system now, and Interstellar Ordinance makes it mandatory to carry *flaaks* with you. Excellent idea, really excellent."

Almost at once, Matilda's educational background should have told her that Haron Gorka was mouthing gibberish. But on the other hand she wanted to believe in him, and the result was that it took until now for her to realize it.

"Stop making fun of me," she said.

"So, naturally, you'll see flaaks all over that system—"

"Stop!"

"What's that? Making fun of you?" Haron Gorka's voice had been so eager as he spoke, high-pitched, almost like a child's, and now he seemed disappointed. He smiled, but it was a sad smile, a smile of resignation, and he said, "Very well. I'm wrong again. You are the sixth, and you're no better than the other five. Perhaps you are even more outspoken. When you see my wife, tell her to come back. Again, she is right and I am wrong…"

Haron Gorka turned his back.

Matilda could do nothing but leave the room, walk back through the house, go outside and get into her car. She noticed, not without surprise, that the other five cars were now gone. She was the last of Haron Gorka's guests to depart.

As she shifted into reverse and pulled out of the driveway, she saw the servant leaving, too. Far down the road, he was walking slowly. Then Haron Gorka had severed that relationship, too, and now he was all alone.

As she drove back to town, the disappointment slowly melted away. There were, of course, two alternatives. Either Haron Gorka was an eccentric who enjoyed this sort of outlandish tomfoolery, or else he was plainly insane. She could still picture him ranting on aimlessly to no one in particular about places that had no existence outside his mind, his voice high-pitched and eager.

It was not until she had passed the small library building that she remembered what she had promised the librarian. In her own way, the aging woman would be as disappointed as Matilda, but a promise was a promise, and Matilda turned the car in a wide U-turn and parked it outside the library.

The woman sat at her desk as Matilda had remembered her: gray, broomstick figure, rigid. But now when she saw Matilda she perked up visibly.

"Hello, my dear," she said.

"Hi."

"You're back a bit sooner than I expected. But then, the other five have returned, too, and I imagine your story will be similar."

"I don't know what they told you," Matilda said. "But this is what happened to me."

She then related quickly everything that had happened,

completely and in detail. She did this first because it was a promise and second because she knew it would make her feel better.

"So," she finished, "Haron Gorka is either extremely eccentric or insane. I'm sorry"

"He's neither," the librarian contradicted. "Perhaps he is slightly eccentric by your standards, but really, my dear, he is neither."

"What do you mean?"

"Did he leave a message for his wife?"

"Why, yes. Yes, he did. But how did you know? Oh, I suppose he told the five."

"No. He didn't. But you were the last, and I thought he would give you a message for his wife—"

Matilda didn't understand. She didn't understand at all, but she told the little librarian what the message was. "He wanted her to return," she said.

The librarian nodded, a happy smile on her lips. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you something."

"What's that?"

"I am Mrs. Gorka."

The librarian stood up and came around the desk. She opened a drawer and took out her hat and perched it jauntily atop her gray hair. "You see, my dear, Haron expects too much. He expects entirely too much."

Matilda did not say a word. One madman a day would be quite enough for anybody, but here she found herself confronted by a second.

"We've been tripping for centuries, visiting every habitable star system from our home near Canopus. But Haron is too demanding. He says I am a finicky traveler, that he could do much better alone, the accommodations have to be just right for me, and so forth. When he loses his temper, he tries to convince me that any number of females of the particular planet would be more than thrilled if they were given the opportunity just to listen to him.

"But he's wrong. It's a hard life for a woman. Some day—five thousand, ten thousand years from now—I will convince him. And then we will settle down on Canopus XIV and cultivate *torgas*. That would be so nice—"

"I'm sure."

"Well, if Haron wants me back, then I have to go. Have a care, my dear. If you marry, choose a homebody. I've had the experience, and you've seen my Haron for yourself."

And then the woman was gone. Numbly, Matilda walked to the doorway and watched her angular figure disappear down the road. Of all the crazy things.

Deneb and Capella and Canopus, those were stars. Add a number, and you might have a planet revolving about each star. Of all the insane—

They were mad, all right, and now Matilda wondered if, actually, they were husband and wife. It could readily be; maybe the madness was catching. Maybe if you thought too much about such things, such travels, you could get that way. Of course, Herman represented the other extreme, and Herman was even worse in his own way—but hereafter Matilda would seek the happy medium.

And, above all else, she had had enough of her pen-pal columns. They were, she realized; for kids.

* * * *

She ate dinner in Cedar Falls and then went out to her car again, preparing for the journey back home. The sun had set and it was a clear night, and overhead the great broad sweep of the Milky Way was a pale rainbow bridge in the sky.

Matilda paused. Off in the distance there was a glow on the horizon, and that was the direction of Haron Gorka's place.

The glow increased; soon it was a bright red pulse pounding on the horizon. It flickered. It flickered again, and finally it was gone.

The stars were white and brilliant in the clear country air. That was why Matilda liked the country better than the city, particularly on a clear summer night when you could see the span of the Milky Way.

But, abruptly, the stars and the Milky Way were paled by the brightest shooting star Matilda had ever seen. It flashed suddenly and remained in view for a full second, searing a bright orange path across the night sky.

Matilda gasped and rushed into her car. She meshed the gears and pressed the accelerator to the floor, keeping it there all the way home.

It was the first time she had ever seen a shooting star going *up*.

THE ARBITER, by John Russell Fearn

The year of 2046—and peace…

The wreckage of past ages of barbarism had been cleared away. All over the Earth stood flawless cities. The peoples had nothing to complain of. They lived in a tempered, happy world of smoothly working machines and vast foolproof control panels. But in this there perhaps lay the seeds of danger.

Selby Doyle, President of the Earth, voted into office by common consent, was a shrewd man. Slim, wiry, with gray hair swept back from an expansive brow, there was little to stamp him as extraordinary, unless it was the resolute tightness of his lips or the squareness of his chin. Here was a man who reasoned, decided, and then acted.

He had accomplished all that he had set out to do and molded the world afresh. It gave him pleasure to sit as he was now, in the dim half light of the lowering night, his chair tilted back on its hind legs, his gray eyes gazing on the lights of Major City as they sprang automatically into being at the scheduled times. The lower lights first, then the higher ones, as the tide of day ebbed from the deeper walks.

Presently he glanced round as the warning light on his great desk proclaimed somebody's approach. Instantly he was the chief magistrate—self-possessed, ready for his visitor. He closed the switches that filled the room with an intense yet restful brilliance.

The automatic door opened. Doyle sat looking at the tall man who crossed the threshold. Vincent Carfax, chairman of the Committee for Public Welfare, inclined his bald head in greeting.

"Your excellency!" he acknowledged, and stepped forward to shake hands.

Doyle waved him to a chair. Carfax was an inhuman index of a man who carried endless statistics in his agile brain. Poker-faced, emaciated as a skeleton, it was his proud boast that he had never been known to smile.

"You will overlook the lateness of the hour, Mr. President?" he asked at length in his precise voice.

"I was about to leave," Doyle answered. "However, only an important matter could bring you here, Carfax. What is it?"

"Unrest."

"Unrest?" President Doyle raised his eyebrows. "Unrest in Major City? My dear fellow!"

"Unrest!" Carfax insisted. "I have suspected it for a long time, but have refrained from bringing it to your notice until I was absolutely certain. Now I have conclusive evidence. Major City is resting on

quicksand, your excellency."

Doyle pondered for a moment. "Tell me about it," he invited.

"The facts are plain," Carfax answered slowly. "The reaction of perfect security after many years spent in wars and struggle is going directly against the adaptive strain Nature builds up. I have had the First in Biology check on that. The human body and mind, keyed to every emergency, had until recently something it could grapple with. Now there is nothing but perfection. The mind has of necessity to find a new form of excitation in order to maintain its equilibrium. Do I make it clear?"

"I provided science for the people," President Doyle said quietly. "Is not that exciting enough?"

"Science, sir, is for the chosen few. Men such as you and I, and all the other master-brains who have brought this sublime state into being, are different. Call them geniuses if you will. At least they do not represent the masses. I have been forced to the unpleasant realization that very few minds are adapted to scientific study. Just as in the pre-Wars Era a man accepted the electric light for what it is without involving himself in the electronic processes embodied in it, so today there is that same aspect of laziness and torpor—and there, Mr. President, lie the seeds of unrest and mischief."

Doyle smiled. "It can be stopped. The Congress has the power."

"This goes deeper than you realize," Carfax said, shaking his bald head, "It is not confined to Major City. It exists nearly everywhere. So much so I felt it my duty to warn you. If this unrest is, not quelled it means—back to war!"

The Chief Executive was silent.

"There is a. way," Carfax said.

"There is?"

"It is becoming increasingly clear that the Last War did not entirely kill the belief in men's minds that force of arms is the only sure way to Right. The element of unrest now present will grow rapidly. At the moment it takes the form of vicious words. It would like to build up a barrier against all things scientific and tear down the perfect structure we have created. But I say—if I may—that the close of the Last War really did end war for ever."

"Perhaps." The President smiled gravely.

"Listen," Carfax resumed, tapping his finger emphatically on the desk. "We must forever outlaw war as a disease. Until now Man has not had sufficient power at his disposal—scientific power that is—to make his dreams come true. The earlier men tried it with pacts, treaties, and leagues of nations—and they all came to grief—because there was no science back of them."

"And now?"

"Now, with tremendous scientific resources at our command, we can make a stand against this eternal enemy of progress, destroy it while it is still young." Carfax hesitated briefly and looked apologetic. "What I am about to say, your Excellency, may make it appear I am teaching you your business. You will forgive that?"

Doyle shrugged. "Only a fool refuses to learn. Continue."

"Many years ago men adopted the principle of arbitration," Carfax resumed. "They were enlightened enough, in civil matters at least, to place any matter of dispute, particularly in instances of capital and labor, before a council usually composed of three experts. That council was vested with complete power to say 'Yes' or 'No' upon the point at issue. Thus matters were arbitrated. Endeavors were made, futilely enough, to devise an arbitration scheme between nations

"The principle of arbitration relied on the good faith of nations to seek arbitration, but was lost in a welter of power politics, and overcome with greed, backed by terrific man power and armaments. Wars followed wars. Arbitration was ignored. But, sir, the idea was not lost. Why cannot a new arbiter arise? Not a man, not three men—but twelve! In olden times a jury was usually composed of twelve men and women. So in respect to that judicial tradition let it still be twelve. Twelve—to arbitrate!"

President Doyle sighed a little. "An excellent idea, old friend. But what twelve men or women, however competent, would be accepted by the masses as sole judges?"

"There comes the difference!" the Statistician said calmly. "I have been investigating on my own account. Ever since this unrest began I have pondered the idea of an Arbiter. I have interviewed at great length, twelve men and women—each one of them equipped with the finest brain in the world for their particular sphere. The twelve major sciences of present day civilization can each have a master at the head. Yes, I have talked with them. Each one of them has foreseen as we have the grim fate that awaits mankind if unrest is allowed to prevail. Now I have their assurance, once the word is made lawful by you, that each one of them is prepared to sacrifice their life for the particular science they control in order that the future of mankind may be assured."

Doyle sat bolt upright. "Sacrifice their life!" he cried. "What on earth do you mean, man? Why should they?"

"Because there can be no other way to make a true Arbiter!"

The President got to his feet, stood by the window with his hands clasped behind him. "Go on," he said, lost in thought.

"Twelve brains will be pooled for the common good," Carfax explained. "Twelve brains will work in unison to provide a common

answer, and a just one, for every conceivable difficulty in every walk of life. Twelve brains, functioning as one unit, will be the judge of humanity's future actions and set discord at naught."

"Even brains die," President Doyle pointed out, turning. "It is only putting off the vital issue for a short period. When the brains die the old trouble will be back. This is just—just a temporary panacea, making things comfortable for the present age. What of posterity, Carfax? This is the problem."

"The brains will never die!" the Statistician said, and at Doyle's look of astonishment he was tempted to smile. But remembering his one boast he didn't.

"I said we could outlaw unrest and war forever, Mr. President. This is no hasty plan. I have conferred with Gascoyne, the First in Anatomy. He says the plan I have devised is feasible. Did it ever occur to you what a poor instrument the brain is for the interpretation of thought?"

"Often. What of it?"

"Gascoyne has asked himself that question long enough to find an answer. We of this age know science agrees that thought is everywhere, that it is expressed in greater or lesser degree according to the quality of the 'receiver' or brain interpreting it. According to Gascoyne a brain is basically an electronic machine—a radio receiver, if you wish it. In proportion to its quality it absorbs and uses the ideas of all-pervading mind and expresses ideas clearly or badly through the medium of a physical body, which in itself is an expression of mind-force."

Doyle was clearly interested now. A faint, unaccustomed flush of pleasure stole into Carfax's pallid cheeks.

"Since, then, mind contains the quintessence of every known science," he went on, "certain brains—or receivers—are better fitted than others, and can be completely duplicated in a mechanical, imperishable mould! Every convolution of a brain, every neuron, every synaptic resistance, can be imitated just as surely as in old days an impression could be taken of a man's gums for the fitting of false dentures. It can be done just as surely as the artificial leg of today has false muscles."

President Doyle came back to the desk and stood waiting.

"With your sanction," Carfax finished slowly, "I propose to model twelve synthetic, imperishable brains on the exact convolutions and measurements belonging to these twelve scientists. It will be done in the fashion of taking a death-mask. The image of the face at death remains in the mask forever. In this case the mechanical brains will be modeled over the real ones, duplicating them in every detail. When this has been done, the mechanical equivalent will take over from the

natural organ, probably with even better results because it will be devoid of the inevitable clogging of human construction. The real brain will shrivel and die afterwards, leaving the mechanical image.

"Once the operation is complete these mechanical brains will be linked together, will go on gaining knowledge with a speed compatible with that of an ordinary brain if it were permitted to live for eternity. That is how the Arbiter will become indestructible and a paragon of justice for all mankind."

Doyle thought, then shook his head.

"Even though I am the elected executive of all Earth, Carfax, I am still human. Twelve people to die—if I give the word—it is unthinkable!"

The Statistician got to his feet, his pale face adamant.

"As the Chief Magistrate, Doyle, you have, to a certain extent, to be devoid of emotion. You spoke of posterity. Posterity can be assured by your word—now. And remember, the twelve will give their lives voluntarily. Think of the thousands of scientists in the past who have given their lives willingly for a lesser cause."

"But the decision to slay twelve did not rest with one man," President Doyle pointed out. Then he turned impatiently. "Carfax, don't misunderstand me. I see the value of your idea. I appreciate the great lengths you must have been to, to get the plan worked, but it would be better if the decision did not rest so completely with me!"

Carfax shrugged. "The facts are plain enough," he said quietly. "The personal brain power of the twelve best men and women will be pooled. Twelve will die, in order that thousands to come may live in peace!"

After a brief silence Doyle began to hedge with vague desperation. He drummed his fingers on the desk. There was an inhuman persuasion in Carfax's cold, emotionless voice.

"What guarantee have we that opposing factions will consult the Arbiter?"

"We have the guarantee of twelve imperishable brains in a mobile machine—a machine controlled by thought waves reacting on special mechanisms. In the event of two opposing factions, the Arbiter will cut off all possible means that might lead to force between the parties concerned. Compulsory arbitration will come into being. It's that—or decay!"

"It is ruling by force," Doyle muttered. "Our present method is by votes."

"It is common sense! All other scientists are strongly in favor of the plan. I convinced them of its value. That leaves only your sanction."

"Not immediately, my friend. I must think." The President pressed

a hand to his forehead. “Leave me for a while. I must talk with Gascoyne first. I’ll acquaint you with my decision later.”

As something apart he heard the soft click of the door as Carfax went…

Even after he had beard Rolf Gascoyne’s fully detailed surgical description of the idea of the Arbiter, it took President Doylc several more days of deliberation before he finally gave his consent to the project, And he did it then only when he was assured of the willingness of the twelve people concerned to sacrifice themselves in order that posterity might have an assured peace.

So he gave the order—and with the twelve men and women and Gascoyne he shut himself away from city affairs for a while in the surgical laboratories.

He answered no calls except those that demanded his personal attention, leaving everything else to Carfax, his deputy.

From then on Doyle watched activity in a field that was unfamiliar to him. He saw the twelve human beings go willingly under the anaesthetic. He saw the brains, still living, being fed by synthetic bloodstream and artificial heart. Then, under orders from Gascoyne, the first brain was duly imprisoned within a soft mold of ductile metal.

Atom by atom, molecule by molecule, under the control of instruments so sensitive that light-vibration disturbed them, metallic molds were set up, fitted into place by slender rods of force timed to a split thousandth of a second, the slightest error in which would have meant utter failure.

But there was no error. Gascoyne saw to that. He was coldly efficient, intolerant of mistakes. The controlling forces made no slip. They had no human qualities in them to err.

Day after day the scientists worked on. From time to time Doyle received disquieting reports from Carfax concerning the rapid increase of unrest amongst the unscientific populace. He handed the information on to Gascoyne who promptly made a speed-up all round.

In a month the first brain was complete. The dried shell of the dead brain was removed and the mechanical counterpart, deadly precise in its way of reasoning, came into being. The actual entity of Unwin Slater, First m Mathematics, had vanished and given place to the computations of Brain Unit No. 1.

Thereafter it was not difficult. Assured now of success in the operation, Doyle felt a little easier in mind—and the experts worked steadily on. Brain after brain was linked up, until at the end of three months the transference was complete. The knowledge of each was unified to the other by delicate vibratory wires, and thence carried back to a central brain pan—in truth a contrivance of machinery of

profound complexity, reactive only to the thoughts of twelve combined brains.

Gascoyne had been clever here. Without twelve brains in unity the machinery would not function, and since this seat of all motivation and pooled knowledge was protected by metals of interlocking atoms, the Arbiter was absolutely foolproof. In fact, the more the atoms of the housing metal continued to disorganize, the more impossible it would be to break down.

* * * *

On October 9, 2046, the Arbiter became visible in public for the first time. In appearance it resembled a great circle of metal about fifty feet wide, studded at regular intervals round the edge with unbreakable domes that sheathed the metallic brains inside. The wires, protected by similar armor, led directly to the circle's center wherein stood the governing machine-unit. For locomotion the thing possessed skillfully jointed metal legs, perfectly balancing the circle of metal they carried. In many ways the Arbiter resembled an enormous wheel studded with twelve nodules and supplied with feet.

In response to public demand, after Doyle's initial introduction of it and outline of its purpose, it gave a brief speech, world-relayed. Its thought waves, passing into photoelectric devices, which m turn forced air through replicas of human vocal cords, produced a voice that was completely impartial and yet arresting.

"People of the world, you are asked to forget that this contrivance is the carrier of twelve brains," the great machine said. "It is a unity, a single unity with a twelve-fold purpose. That purpose is peace on earth and goodwill towards men. To that end I, the Arbiter, will work. Let any man or woman who thinks of transgressing the peace pause now and think! The Arbiter stands ready!"

Thereafter the Arbiter was allowed complete liberty. It was entirely self-contained, sleepless. It moved as it chose, but usually stayed pretty close to Major City.

Its first decisive action was to subdue to a considerable extent the activities of the restive ones. With an uncanny sense of deduction it unearthed a plot whereby a thousand unscientific insurgents were plotting to seize a territory between Major City and its nearest neighbor one hundred miles away.

The insurgents had hoped to establish a colony for themselves. Had they succeeded they would undoubtedly have been the first to break the unity of a great world-wide nation in which all class distinction and creed had been leveled into one brotherhood.

But the Arbiter sifted the rebels' plans from top to bottom, and since in this case there was no question of arbitration between parties the mechanical judge took the next most effective step.

One by one the entire thousand met death, ruthlessly, inexplicably—but certainly. The scientists became a little worried. That the first act of the Arbiter should be to slay without question was something of a shock.

If it did nothing else, the action at least quelled all the other restive spirits. They turned in increasing numbers to scientific study.

Thereafter, for a year, the Arbiter had little of importance to do. It sorted out minor disputes with calm, emotionless words and its decision was implicitly obeyed. President Selby Doyle felt satisfied. His first fears had vanished. The Arbiter was a panacea after all. Then came the affair of Grenson, the physicist.

Grenson, a young and ardent man of the New Era, was sure that he had discovered the real meaning of an electron's wave and particle motion. Working alone in his laboratory he knew that he was on the verge of probing the long sought for secret of fusion power from the atom.

Immediately, he went to the President, stood at the desk and looked for the first time upon the quiet, calm personage who ruled the world.

"Sit down, young man," Doyle invited at last, eying his visitor steadily and inwardly deciding that he liked him. "Sit down and give me the full details."

Grenson gathered his courage. President Doyle snapped a recording switch then he sat back to listen to the rush of eager, excited phrases. For fifteen minutes Grenson held forth on the possibilities of his discovery, still theoretical, and through it all the Chief Executive sat in silence, linking up the points in his keen mind, fitting together postulation with postulation.

At last Grenson became silent, flushed with his own energies. Doyle gave him an encouraging smile. "In theory, young man, I shoukd say your scheme is feasible. If so, you may be sure that Major City will fully reward you. But first we must have advice in this very specialized field." He pressed the switch of his intercom. "Send in the First in Physics," he ordered.

For ten minutes President and worker sat in silence, the young man looking round the great office and Doyle busy at his desk. Then Horley Dodd, the First in Physics, arrived—a sharp-nosed, scrub-headed man with thick-lens eyeglasses.

"You want me, sir?" His tone was by no means pleasant.

"Yes, Dodd, I do. This young man here, if his theory is as good as it sounds, has the secret of fusion power. Just listen to the playback of

his exposition."

President Doyle flicked a button. There was silence as Grenson's eager voice came forth from the instrument. The First in Physics stood with his hands locked behind him, biting his lower lip and staring up at the ceiling. The voice ceased at last. An automatic switch started the sound track ribbon reeling back to the start again.

"Well?" the President asked, leaning back in his chair.

"Frankly, I'd say it's impossible," Dodd said briefly. "It is at best a mere theory, and as such does not advance us one iota beyond what we already know."

"That is a very narrow viewpoint," the President observed. Dodd's sharp little eyes sparked defiance.

"It's the only viewpoint, your Excellency."

"But, sir, I have it all worked out!" Grenson sprang to his feet earnestly. "Naturally, I am a man of only moderate means. I cannot afford the costly apparatus necessary to prove my idea. That is why I brought the scheme to the President. Now you say it's no good."

"You had no right to bring it here!" Dodd snapped.

"He had every right," the President said. "What is more, Dodd, I have neither time nor patience for this unseemly wrangling." He got to his feet decisively. "We have the Arbiter to decide such things for us. Come into the laboratory, both of you."

He preceded the pair to a sealed inner door and opened it. They passed within to the monster of legs and nodules occupying the center of the floor.

"Arbiter, a question arises," President Doyle stated quietly, stopping before the thing's sensitive pickup. "Is the theory of atomic energy from fusion about to be given to you practical—or not?" He turned aside and switched on a relay of Grenson's voice-record. Again that silence and Grenson stood with his gaze uncertainly watching the glittering monster that was to determine his life's ideal.

After long thought at the close of the exposition the Arbiter spoke.

"The theory of Grenson is not practicable! The secret of controllable fusion power will never be found because the very nature of the atom makes it impossible. The judgment is awarded to Horley Dodd."

The First in Physics smiled acidly and glanced at the President. Doyle was stroking his chin slowly. Then he turned to the dazed Grenson and patted him gently on the shoulder.

"I am sorry, my boy—I really am. I did feel that you had something, but the Arbiter cannot be wrong. The decision is final."

"Final!" Grenson shouted. "Do you think I am going to take the opinion of a thing like this—this Arbiter? Do you think I shall give up

a theory because a few canned brains say so? Not on my life! I'm going on, and on. Yes, I'll make the money somehow to prove my idea."

He swung round, red-faced with anger, and vanished through the doorway.

Doyle watched him go, then shrugged.

"You're too sentimental, Mr. President," Dodd said brusquely. "You allow too many of these crack-brained theorists to take advantage of you. He has the wrong idea entirely. What he and his sort need is control, not encouragement."

"As long as I am Chief Magistrate I shall make my own decisions," Doyle answered quietly. "I shall not need to detain you any longer, Dodd. Thank you for coming."

The scientist went out and President Doyle returned slowly into his own office, stood by the-desk, thinking. That young man had had a great idea.

It was towards evening when the private wire buzzed. Doyle look up the receiver and Vincent Carfax's lean, cold visage came onto the screen.

"Your Excellency, I understand from my agents that you had a young man to see you today? Chap named Grenson? And that the decision of the Arbiter went against him?"

"Correct."

"He died at five thirty this afternoon! He was slain by mind-force from the Arbiter. I thought it would interest you."

Doyle stared at the screen fixedly. "You are sure?"

"I never make mistakes," Carfax answered dispassionately. "I don't like it, this continued display of force!"

"No. Neither do I!"

President Doyle cut off, his jaw set with uncommon hardness. He got to his feet and walked into the adjoining laboratory, stood staring at the metal monster. Even as he stood making his survey he could sense the inhuman aura the thing radiated.

"Arbiter, you slew without provocation!" he snapped suddenly. "Why? I demand to know. You told Grenson he was wrong, but what need was there to murder him as well?"

"That question is outside your province. You are the President, yes, but you had me created for the undisputed adjudication of all matters capable of argument, for the carrying out of these adjudications afterwards. The only way to prevent a continued disobedience of commands is to kill! Grenson, in spite of my decision, was determined to work in spite of me. So he died. So it must always be with those who are defiant. Otherwise, the purpose of the Arbiter is lost."

“But it’s barbarism!” President Doyle cried hoarsely. “The very thing I believed you’d stop!”

“I am not answerable to anybody for what I believe or think,” the Arbiter answered implacably.

“But suppose young Grenson had been right? Suppose he had touched the verge of unlocking fusion power? Think what it could have meant to us. We need that power. Earth’s stores of radioactive materials, petroleum, coal, and certain metals cannot last much longer. Supplies were drained to the uttermost in building and equipping the cities. Fusion power would solve many things at one bound. Even the economic transmutation of elements, a secret we desperately need to find. At the least you could have let Grenson go on experimenting.”

“Not in face of my decision. I acted as I saw best. So far as I am concerned the matter is finished.”

Doyle hesitated, staring at the thing bitterly, then with clenched fists he went slowly from the laboratory. Somewhere, he knew, something was wrong.

The treasured plans for security had gone utterly awry.

Very gradually it was forced on the adherents of scientific progress that the Arbiter was anything but what it was intended to be. Science became divided into two camps—the strugglers and the opposers, with Dodd as chief of the opposers.

Dodd, though a scientist, firmly believed in the inaccessibility of Nature’s inner secrets, and had neither vision nor tolerance. He was too content to accept science for what it was rather than for what it might become. In that very fact lay the seed of disaster; The camp of Science, divided against itself, began to show signs of decay.

Time and again the Arbiter was called in, and every time the verdict went to Horley Dodd and his party.

Baffled, sickened by the obvious breakdown in the scheme for universal peace, President Selby Doyle’s grip on things commenced to weaken. Already worn out with the cares of office, to which had been added crushing disappointment, the illness that preceded his demise was brief.

Officials were present round his deathbed—but officials were all they were, men who had served him because it had been their duty to serve. To the dying President there was only one face that represented loyalty and friendship, and it belonged to Carfax.

“Carfax; you must be President,” Doyle whispered. “As—as it is my final wish, you will be chosen. All around this bed are the men who will elect you. I have their promise. I think that I have—have been too lenient, but no such emotions will trouble you, Carfax. You are younger. You are an expert scientist. You must defeat this Arbiter,

my friend. Find out why it has turned traitor! You promise?"

"I promise," Carfax answered.

President Doyle relaxed and smiled. It was a smite that remained fixed. The President of the Earth was dead.

An hour later the assembled scientists, all of them leaders on the side of the Strugglers, filed into the main office to face their new President. They found Carfax at the great desk, coldly silent. He wailed until the group was fully assembled.

"Gentlemen, for seven years now we have been chained hand and foot by an invention of our own making—a metal dictator—and it bas betrayed us. We don't know why, yet—but we do know that unless we defy this Arbiter, or find forces which can destroy it, we are a doomed people."

Gascoyne shook his head.

"We cannot destroy it—at least not in the light of present scientific knowledge," he said seriously. "We made the thing of a metal whose atoms interlock, remember. It is sealed forever. We made it foolproof—and to what end?"

"It is in our own hands to determine the end," President Carfax retorted. "Unless we act, we're finished. It is the very law of the Universe that there must be progress. Every day now brings us up against new difficulties. Sources of power are running low. New sources—intended for us by Nature—are barred, because the scientists that would develop them are prevented by this twelve-brained monstrosity. I tell you we must defeat it!"

Assured that he might be able to succeed, President Carfax went to work to prove his words. The Strugglers began anew the experiments that had been truncated by the death of Grenson.

They worked to within an ace of solving the secret of controllable fusion power. Carfax himself got far enough to extract a terrific amount of energy from a cube of copper. From incredibly small pieces of highly conducive metal he built up a model power plant, which, on a giant scale, would replace the already sadly worn and failing equipment from which the cities derived their light and power.

The other scientists explored different realms. Some reasoned out new methods of synthesis by which the fast waning supplies of oil and coal could be replaced. Another was convinced that he had transmutation of metals in his grip, with which the cities could be repaired as time went on. Yet another saw his chance of harnessing the waste energy of the sun on a large scale.

By degrees, under Carfax's fine leadership, the determined scientists began to lay plans for the foundation of real Utopia.

Then the Arbiter struck! In a public speech it declared that the discoveries claimed, by President Vincent Carfax and his colleagues

were nothing better than fancy. The Arbiter took sides with the Opposers and launched a small but savagely effective massacre against the Strugglers. In three days of desperate skirmish and slaughter Carfax and his followers were wiped out. Horley Dodd, leader of the Opposers, was killed too.

Not that it signified much. The Opposers were now in complete control, backed always by the implacable Arbiter.

Languid with victory, the Opposers lazily repaired the damage and then sat back to enjoy the comforts that Vincent Carfax had sworn were coming to an end. Apathy set in, born of lack of anything to accomplish. Even the Arbiter had nothing left to judge. The final vanquishing had shown to the Opposers that progress was a form of disease and entirely unnecessary. Better to relax and enjoy the fruits of labor.

The year 2048 passed away and was followed by a gap of somnolent, drifting years until 2060. Nothing had been accomplished, nothing done. Life was one great bliss of effortless satisfaction. The pioneers were lost in the mists of memory. Science, as an art; had ceased to be.

2060—2080—3000—and the Arbiter was still in faultless condition. Indeed it had been made indestructible.

Men and women died, children were born in limited members, grew up, each one knowing less of science than those before them. Astronomy, physics, mathematics? They were things the ancients had studied, said the history records. Somewhere in the smeared archives was the name of Selby Doyle.

Then in 3000 came the first warnings of the trouble Carfax had foreseen. The weather controlling machinery broke down, its central bearings worn out from continued inattention. In consequence the weather suddenly reverted to its former unreliable state and deluged whole continents of synthetic crops, destroyed a world's food supply for a year.

Hurricanes tore across the world. Cities that were slow1y eroding through continued lack of repair eroded still more. That gray metal, so shiny at first, was cracking now, flaking under the continued onslaught of the elements.

A nervous flurry passed through the people. For the first time they were really alarmed. They rushed to the weather controlling station but could only stare helplessly at silent, useless machinery. Knowledge was dead.

This was not all. Trouble came thick and fast. With the failure of the crops, animals began to die off. The machines that tended them only functioned so long as they received—from still other machines—steady supplies of crops, specially developed for cattle consumption.

When the supply stopped the machines stopped too, and nobody knew what to do about it.

The seed of disaster flourished with terrific speed, burst the foundations of the formerly calm cities and upset the tranquility of the pleasure-softened people. The collapse of the weather machinery presaged the overture to the end. Blinding cataracts of rain seeped through corroded roofs, the water short-circuiting the vital power and light machinery, already at breaking point through wear and tear.

Light and power failed in each city simultaneously. Famine reared over a disturbed, turmoiled world girt about with scurrying clouds. In desperation the people turned to the Arbiter, their leader.

But the Arbiter did nothing! It ignored the wild pleas hurled at it, marched out of the insecure laboratory that was its home and departed into the storm-lashed country. In the hour of need it had deserted them.

Panic seized the people at the realization. They fled from cities, whither they knew not, floundered in a mad exodus seeking food that was not there, cursing aloud to the heavens because synthesis had destroyed all natural growth and cultivation. Specialization had been proved a tragedy. Escape from a world that was too perfect became an obsession.

Gradually, inevitably, it was forced upon the people in those hours of mad struggle and desperation that they were face to face with certain extinction.

3010. Panic and struggle had gone. A strange calm was on the world. Cities, crumbled through disuse, ravaged by tempest and flood, poked blind, inquisitive spires to cleared skies. The sun crossed a sky that was, in the main, peaceful again. Climate had adjusted back to its normal vagaries.

But the soft winds of spring, the hot sun of summer, the cool chill of the fall, and the heavy snows of winter fell on bones that were scattered, white and forgotten, across Earth's face. Alone in this world of emptiness, where natural grass and trees were trying once more to struggle through, there moved a cumbersome affair of metal, still cold and impartial, inhuman and relentless.

It climbed mountains. it prowled plains, it searched the ruins of cities, it brooded alone. The Arbiter.

3040 A.D. 3060 A.D. Then the aliens came.

They were strange, birdlike creatures, masters of space travel, lords of their own peculiar science. They came not as conquerors but with the intention of making friends with the third-world people. Their amazement was complete when they could not find a soul alive.

Then eventually they found the Arbiter. With their superior science they analyzed it, probed its deepest secrets, broke open the

supposedly impregnable sheathing by four-dimensional tools.

The aliens remained on Earth for several days while the leading scientist, Cor Santu, pondered over the curious mystery of a lost race. From studying the dissembled Arbiter and the still remaining records of human events, transcribed by the Leader of Languages, he built up an explanation of the problem.

"Poor earthly scientists!" was his final comment. "Brilliant men indeed—but they forgot one thing. If a world or people are to survive it must have progress, even as we have found in our own experience. Wars are indeed evil and should be prevented. But dictators are worse. Right alone can prevail in the end.

"Selby Doyle and Vincent Carfax did not trust to Right, to a Universal mind control for guidance. No, they invented a machine of twelve mechanical brains to bring them peace. Such a device could not solve the problem. They forgot that a brain, in progressing, must expand. We have seen that, in any case, these Earth beings only used a fifth of their full brain capacity. That, later, would have developed. But in the machine they strangled it. Carfax and the surgeon Gascoyne made these mechanical brains fixed to what was, at that time, the present. To the Arbiter it was always the present! Being rigid metal the imprisoned brains could not expand, could not go a step beyond the day of their creation. That is why the Arbiter destroyed all things that suggested progress, and also because it feared any sign of progress would bring its power to an end. It was just another dictator.

"Such metal bound brains, living in a past world, could not visualize anything progressive. Conservationism gone mad! From the instant the brains were molded of metal they deteriorated. And having no human sentiment they destroyed without question. So when the great catastrophe came the Arbiter was powerless—as powerless as all the others who had not kept pace with progress. Nature must progress, or perish. That is evolution."

Thereon Cor Santu ended his observations. But when his fleet of spaceships soared through the sunny sky towards fresh worlds of exploration, there was left behind a smashed, irreparable mass of melted cogs, wires, and movements. It was a rusting monument to a race that had died—a race that had fallen prey to laziness and surrendered its freedom to the ruthless whims of a machine.

THE GRANDMOTHER-GRANDDAUGHTER CONSPIRACY, by Marissa Lingen

Dr. Hannah Vang watched the cephalid turn the box over with his tentacles. She leaned forward, aware of the timer out of the corner of her eye without watching it. He was a smart beastie, she knew, and would get into the box to get the icthyoid in it. The question was whether he'd learned anything from last time. It was the same box, the same latching mechanism, everything as much the same as she could make it.

The seconds ticked by. Finally the box sprung open, and Hannah sighed; seventy-two-point-three seconds. It had taken seventy-one-point-eight before.

The squid-like alien did not remember. Probably it *could* not remember. And that was going to be a problem.

Delta Moncerotis Four was home to a human colony of about twenty thousand. No one knew how many of the native cephalids there were, in seven different major species. They swarmed through the oceans, some of them phosphorescing merrily. They mingled with each other, except for the ones that didn't seem to. They used things to pry into other things, if the other things were good to eat.

The two things they did not seem to do were remembering and communicating with the alien monkeys who had invaded the part of their planet they weren't using anyway.

Which would not have been important if the alien monkeys in question hadn't wanted to gently but firmly kick the cephalids out of the waters around their city to build an isolated area for human-edible aquaculture.

Hannah was sure that having the cephalids where they belonged would be good for the environment and good for the colonists. There was so much planet left to survey that the cephalid interactions with local coraloids and icthyoids might vary extremely, and, from her marine xenobiologist standpoint, interestingly. She had chosen a largely watery planet for a reason. But with an entire planet worth of oceans for the cephalids to inhabit, it was hard to convince the colony government that the specific area around the city was absolutely necessary for the continued well-being of anyone in particular.

"We change planets when we settle," the governor had told her. "That's just how it is. If it was an intelligent species—"

"They're tool-users!" Hannah had protested.

“They appear to be opportunistic tool-users. You know that as well as I do. They’ll pick something up and make it into a skewer or a pry bar, and then they’ll drop it in the silt and do the whole thing over again with a different piece of vegetation or rock next time they need the very same tool. If they could tell us they wanted to be where they are, we’d listen. We’ve had a good record of that since the third wave of colonies.”

“I know. It’s just—even if they don’t remember things like us, they have their own interactions with their environment, that we barely know about yet!”

The governor had sighed. “If you can get any form of communication with them, we’ll see what they have to say. But if we can’t talk to them, we’ll have to treat them like animals.” At her sad look, the governor said, “We treat animals better than we used to.”

Still, even with the aquaculture developments well into development, Hannah found herself more determined, not less, that she would find some way to communicate. This was not proving easy with a species that seemed to figure everything out as if for the first time.

On the other hand, it made them easy to keep entertained. She left the cephalid with a ring puzzle it had seen a dozen times before, busily trying the different ways to get the rings unhooked, and went home for the night.

When the door slid open, Hannah could hear her mother’s voice in the living room. “You’re in my house, and you look like me, so you must be my daughter—no, granddaughter?”

“That’s right, Granny Dee,” Lily said. “I’m your granddaughter. Lily.”

“But I don’t remember you,” said Dee thoughtfully. Hannah closed her eyes and leaned against the door, letting them go through the ritual without her. It was best when Dee was not interrupted once she’d pulled the implant loose. The long pause was always the same. “And I remember that we’ve gotten good at curing genetic memory problems, so this isn’t the normal deterioration with age.”

“No, it isn’t,” said Lily. “You were in an accident. But we’ve got a device that can help you. You just have to plug this little cord back into the socket here, see?”

The pause here was even longer, as it always was: Dee deciding whether she could trust her granddaughter, then agreeing, as always, to plug the augmenter back in. And then Dee’s voice was surer, just as analytical but with better data. “I’m sorry, Lily.”

“Hey, no problem.” Hannah decided that was her cue to enter, just in time to see Lily kissing her grandmother on the cheek. “Could happen to anyone.”

In fact, if it could happen to anyone, if it was common the way organic memory problems were, they might have a better design. Hannah had asked her mother three times if she didn't want to move back to a larger colony, somewhere they had the personnel and equipment for a more permanent implant. But Dee's response had been impatient.

"This is your home," she'd said. "And it's my home, and more than all that, it's Lily's home. I don't want to be somewhere else. We'll plug it back in and go along with our lives, you and me and Brian and Lily. We'll get by."

But Brian had left. He couldn't stand dealing with Dee, and Hannah, when she was honest with herself, couldn't entirely blame him. Her mother couldn't live alone with the implant's unreliability, and the colony wasn't big enough to have facilities. But she wished things had been otherwise.

"It's easy for you," Brian had said, throwing his clothes in his suitcase.

Hannah had let her voice rise: "*Easy*?"

For a moment he was the old Brian, the man she'd married. The one she'd counted on for Lily's sake. "I shouldn't have said that. I don't mean easy. I know it's not; she's your mother. I know it's not. But when you come home and she's pulled the implant loose, she lets you talk her through to plugging it back in again. I don't have time to deal with the constable every time I get back from work before Lily gets home from school! I don't have the energy, Hannah. You know I always liked Dee, but—"

"But," Hannah agreed.

"The good memories are getting soiled with every conversation with the constable," said Brian. "With every time I have to justify my existence in my own house *again*."

Lily was like most of the colony kids, tough and talented, resilient, not afraid of work. She was not thrilled to have her father living across town. She was not thrilled to have to plug her grandmother back together every few days. But Hannah was proud to see that her daughter already understood that her life was not a series of endless thrills; Lily did what needed doing without a great deal of fuss about it.

Hannah tried not to brood over dinner with her mother and her daughter. "Still nothing from the squids, huh?" said Lily.

"Nothing," said Hannah miserably. "I keep thinking I've got a chance at least, and then—" She wiggled her fingers in the air like tentacles. "They're so clever. They're so very good at figuring things out. If the other species are as clever as the pink ones, no wonder there's sort of a squiddy feel to the whole ocean."

“But they’re still not clever enough to signal back and forth,” said her mother.

“They’re not the right kind of clever. It’s not what they do,” said Hannah. “I’m really starting to think we’re on the brink of proving—to beyond a shadow of *my* doubt anyway—that this is just not what they do.”

“But it’s what *we* do,” said Lily.

Hannah sighed. “Exactly.”

And if the alien species they encountered couldn’t bend far enough to do things the human way, would the humans bend enough to see how they were doing them instead? It had worked with some of the larger colonies of lichen-like species on Gamma Centauri Four, but elsewhere results were mixed. And on Earth, dogs and cats were immensely more popular as pets than squid and lichen.

The cephalid did not grow easier over the next few weeks. Hannah watched her clever subject make his morning rounds. The pink tentacles groped along the tank, then slowed, delicately searching for something in the silt. Hannah’s heart skipped a beat: had he hidden something there for later? Would he remember after all?

But no; after churning up the silt so that it wafted into the water, the cephalid resumed his exploration of the tank. He had likely been looking for a snack, and that was the sort of terrain in which juicy tidbits lurked. Instinct, not memory. Or perhaps they should think of it as species memory rather than individual memory? In that case, they’d be relying upon generations upon generations of mutation to teach the cephalids how to communicate with humans. Not, Hannah thought, heartening.

She tried putting one of the remote machines into the tank with the cephalid and showing it how to do a few of the tricks she’d done. It repeated them, watching; there was something there that looked like short-term memory. But it didn’t last. No matter how many times she went back to the same puzzles, the cephalids didn’t recall how to work them after they’d been out of sight, or after even a few minutes had passed.

Her return home was smooth and peaceful; Dee’s implant had stayed plugged in, and she and Lily were frying tofu for dipping in nuoc leo sauce. Their hands were equally sure, and all the tofu came out soft in the middle and crisp on the outside, just perfect, just the way Hannah liked it, just the way she could never make it herself.

Hannah watched Lily doing the dishes. She was nearing the age when colony kids found apprenticeships or went offworld to study. She wanted to ask Lily what she hoped to do, but she was afraid of the answer. Instead, she sought the mundane. “Got any plans for the weekend?”

“I’m taking Grandma to the beach again tomorrow,” said Lily. “She liked it last time. And I have astronomy homework.”

“Are you enjoying astronomy?” Hannah tried not to hold her breath for the answer. Astronomers traveled too much to keep close ties to their families on colony worlds; time dilation made it impossible.

“It’s fine. Biology’s better,” said Lily. “Biology looks back at you.”

“I think the astronomers would say that about astronomy.”

Lily shrugged. “Then I guess I’m not an astronomer.”

Hannah laughed and hugged her. “Have a good time at the beach with Grandma, then.”

Lily smiled her self-contained little smile. “Oh, we will.”

Later that night, when Lily was off typing homework answers into her handheld, Hannah sat down on the couch across from her mother’s armchair. Dee paused her book and looked expectant.

“Do you remember that microscope you got me when I was a kid? Maybe five years younger than Lily, maybe more,” said Hannah dreamily. Dee made an encouraging noise, so Hannah went on: “It came with one of those books showing what you would expect to see, and I looked at a drop of water—we were on Alpha Moncerotis Six then, remember? And it was so different from in the book. The little unicellular creatures swimming around on Alpha Mon Six were totally different from the Earth ones.

“And I loved it, I just *loved* it. I begged cultures from anybody who’d give me one. Cheek cells, hairs from whatever animal they were studying, plants from the colony, anything. It was the best present.”

“Funny, you remembering that after all these years.”

Hannah glanced down automatically, but her mother followed her gaze. “No, the unit’s fine. I really think the solder will hold it awhile longer. I just don’t remember. I didn’t before the injury, and I never will. I’m sorry I’ve forgotten it, because you sound like it was a hugely important piece of your childhood—I wish I could remember. But it’s like that, honey. There’ll be something Lily thinks is the worst thing you ever did to ruin her life, or the best thing you ever did to make it work, and you will blink at her and say, ‘I did? Did I? Oh.’”

“I suppose that’s how it works,” said Hannah. “I remember her first steps, and of course she doesn’t. Why shouldn’t there be things that are the other way around.”

“There have to be, or she wouldn’t be her own person,” said Dee.

“Well, she’s certainly that,” said Hannah ruefully.

“Oh yes,” said Dee. “She’ll surprise you. That’s what children are for.”

A few weeks later, Hannah looked up from the cephalid tank and

its computer and found Lily and Dee standing there watching her.

"We have a surprise for you," said Lily.

"Can it wait, honey?" Hannah cast her mother an imploring glance, but Dee looked as implacable as Lily. "I'm in the middle of work here."

"Is it going well?" asked Dee.

Hannah glared at her. "You know it's not."

"A break will be good for you. Come."

Hannah walked with her mother through their ocean-side research complex. Lily danced ahead of them like a much younger child. Hannah sighed. "You know I like to spend time with both of you, Mom, but—"

"Hush, dear. Watch Lily."

Lily was peeling off her clothes; she had her wetsuit underneath. She climbed onto the lip of one of the cephalid tanks. Hannah and Dee caught up with her.

"Lil," said Hannah, "I don't think now's the time."

"This is what I wanted to show you, Mom."

Dee passed a tiny flashlight and a little black box up to her granddaughter, who jumped in the tank with it. Hannah stepped forward ineffectually, knowing she couldn't stop her. "Oh, Mom."

"It's not my unit, it's the spare," said Dee. "They're waterproof. Lily's tried this before."

"And if the spare gets damaged—"

"Relax. This is important. We knew you wouldn't approve right away, or we wouldn't have done it without you."

Hannah shook her head. "That my mother and my daughter should use that line against me, *yy*."

Dee rolled her eyes. "It's not against you, it's for you. Just watch."

A curious cephalid was approaching Lily. She held out the leads to the memory unit. He probed them with one slender tentacle. Lily gently guided the leads into the cephalid's mouth orifice.

"It's got a light display," said Dee. "I've been working on getting it connected to the output."

"A light display?"

The cephalid engulfed the leads, and the light display made itself known: every diode in it blazed. Then they rippled in a random-looking series of patterns.

"We think he's trying to remember how to work it," said Dee. "We're not sure. We thought you could figure it out."

"An external memory unit with built-in communications," said Hannah. "Oh my."

"It was Lily's idea. I told the nanites where to solder."

Hannah took a breath and spoke gently. "Mom, you know that

the cephalid may not be able to use your device as memory as we would understand it, right? Being able to light up the panel doesn't necessarily mean being able to store thoughts as memory."

"Oh, I know, dear. We thought of that. But we thought at least it'd be something to find out."

"Oh yes," Hannah agreed. "Definitely something to find out."

Lily flashed the flashlight at the cephalid, three times. It recoiled. She flashed again, and the light display went dark. Then it lit up with a blue pattern, three times. Lily repeated it.

"She's a natural," said Hannah.

"Nature, nurture, whatever!" said Dee, grinning.

After a few more flash-patterns, Lily swam back to the lip of the tank. The cephalid made a green pattern at her, but she climbed out anyway.

"You can do it like a real experiment," she said, shaking her black hair out. "You know how to design that sort of thing. Granny and I just got it together for you."

"I'll want to have a light bank set up," said Hannah thoughtfully.

Lily pressed the tiny diode flashlight into her hand. "To begin with."

Hannah turned to the cephalid and squeezed the trigger on the flashlight twice.

Two ripples of light appeared on the modified implant's screen: first the blue pattern and then the green. "Hello again," said Hannah aloud.

They had no idea what they'd done, she thought. If the cephalid could deal with an external electronic system, there had to have been something in their past that allowed for it. Something evolved? More likely something created and lost—and perhaps not by themselves? There would have to be a lot more xenoarchaeology before they would know who had been there before, and what they had taught the cephalids about the use of these tools.

But there would be time for that later. For now there was a conversation Hannah had wanted to have for a long time. Smiling at the retreating backs of her mother and daughter, she flashed the little flashlight in response.

TOP SECRET, by David Grinnell

I cannot say whether I am the victim of a very ingenious jest on the part of some of my wackier friends or whether I am just someone accidentally "in" on some top-secret business. But it happened, and it happened to me personally, while visiting Washington recently, just rubbernecking you know, looking at the Capitol and the rest of the big white buildings.

It was summer, fairly hot, Congress was not in session, nothing much was doing, most people vacationing. I was that day aiming to pay a visit to the State Department, not knowing that I couldn't, for there was nothing public to see there unless it's the imposing and rather martial lobby (it used to be the War Department building, I'm told). This I did not find out until I had blithely walked up the marble steps to the entrance, passed the big bronze doors, and wandered about in the huge lobby, wherein a small number of people, doubtless on important business, were passing in and out.

A guard, sitting near the elevators, made as if to start in my direction to find out who and what the deuce I wanted, when one of the elevators came down and a group of men hustled out. There were two men, evidently State Department escorts, neatly clad in gray double-breasted suits, with three other men walking with them. The three men struck me as a little odd; they wore long, black cloaks, big slouch hats with wide brims pulled down over their faces, and carried portfolios. They looked for all the world like cartoon representations of cloak-and-dagger spies. I supposed that they were some sort of foreign diplomats and, as they were coming directly toward me, stood my ground, determined to see who they were.

The floor was marble and highly polished. One of the men nearing me suddenly seemed to lose his balance. He slipped; his feet shot out from under him and he fell. His portfolio slid directly at my feet.

Being closest to him, I scooped up the folio and was the first to help raise him to his feet. Grasping his arm, I hoisted him from the floor—he seemed to be astonishingly weak in the legs; I felt almost that he was about to topple again. His companions stood about rather flustered, helplessly, their faces curiously impassive. And though the man I helped must have received a severe jolt, his face never altered expression.

Just then the two State Department men recovered their own poise, rushed about, and, getting between me and the man I had rescued, rudely brushed me aside and rushed their party to the door.

Now what bothers me is not the impression I got that the arm

beneath that man's sleeve was curiously woolly, as if he had a fur coat underneath the cloak (and this in a Washington summer!), and it's not the impression that he was wearing a mask (the elastic band of which I distinctly remember seeing amidst the kinky, red, close-cropped hair of his head). No, it's not that at all, which might be merely momentary misconstructions on my part. It's the coin that I picked up off the floor where he'd dropped his portfolio.

I've searched through every stamp and coin catalogue I can find or borrow, and I've made inquiries of a dozen language teachers and professors, and nobody can identify that coin or the lettering around its circumference.

It's about the size of a quarter, silvery, very light in weight but also very hard. Besides the lettering on it, which even the Bible Society, which knows a thousand languages and dialects, cannot decipher, there is a picture on one side and a symbol on the other.

The picture is the face of a man, but of a man with very curiously wolfish features: sharp canine teeth parted in what could be a smile; a flattened, broad, and somewhat protruding nose, more like a pug dog's muzzle; sharp, widely spaced, vulpine eyes, and definitely hairy and pointed ears.

The symbol on the other side is a circle with latitude and longitude lines on it. Flanking the circle, one on each side, are two crescent-shaped moons.

I wish I knew just how far those New Mexico rocket experiments have actually gone.

LIVING UNDER THE CONDITIONS, by James K. Moran

As the early April sun made his cheeks flush, Michael didn't know what to believe in anymore.

The birds bitched in the trees as he crossed through the middle of the park, which smelled of mud, dry grass, and strong marijuana. Two men wearing shirts and ties sat on a nearby bench on the rectangular perimeter, eating take-out lunches in Styrofoam boxes. A middle-aged blond man threw a Frisbee to his retriever in the centre of the park. Mid-morning traffic rushed by on all sides.

All this meant nothing to Michael, who glanced at his watch and sped up. The birds might vanish or change into other animals, the smells of spring might change to fall, the people might float away if the gravitational constant ended, and the speeding cars might suddenly have no traction.

He had spent enough time getting used to it but had never liked it. When Michael was growing up, he and other kids shared stories about where their parents were when the Wormhole Incident happened. Civilians didn't know the details even now, except that scientists had discovered a wormhole in space, not far from Earth. Various interstellar agencies around the world had rushed in to study and capitalize on the discovery, but something had happened. One day, morning became night, and since then, things were always changing—time, eras, laws—the Conditions, as they called them. That was why Michael had checked the Weathering Change network before leaving the house, in case anything came up. The forecast had looked clear, but he knew they were rarely right.

But right now, he had only 15 minutes before his job interview and he was in a white-hot panic. That wasn't enough time to walk the eight blocks to the office, and there wasn't a bus around. Michael's heart pounded faster. Sweat covered his knit brow, palms, and already-sweaty armpits. A smell of aftershave and cologne rose from him like steam.

Michael glanced down at his freshly ironed black dress pants to make sure he had not stepped in a puddle. They looked fine. The growling engine of an approaching bus made him look up.

Michael bore down on the far corner of the park where the bus pulled up to pick up a half-dozen passengers. Maybe he had finally had a lucky break. He quickly joined the line, boarded, paid, and shuffled with the crowd toward the rear of the bus.

The bus pulled away, passing the beer store and parking lot

across the street.

A billboard at the far end of the lot advertised a tall, frosty mug full of ale that threatened to spill voluptuous foam over the lip of the glass. The ad read “In these times of change, remember that change is a good thing. Try Reef’s Crimson Ale.”

Michael wasn’t so sure that change was a good thing. But he needed rent money badly and hadn’t worked in a month. Now in his early 30s, the career crisis of finding a day job hit him each morning. This was his first interview call in months.

Michael jostled past a seated, overweight woman with a hair lip. Her dirty beige jogging pants had a stripe along each side. With her right foot, covered in a running shoe, she gently nudged a pudgy baby dressed in a red jumper and stuffed into a stroller. Michael narrowly avoided tripping over both of them. The woman coughed, her stale breath wafting up to him over the smells of sweat and soiled diapers.

Michael stumbled past a tall, black man with long dreadlocks listening to a yellow MP4 player. The man nodded and swayed his slim, muscular shoulders as Michael navigated to the back door and grabbed a metal railing with his right hand.

“Excuse me,” someone said timidly behind him.

Michael tried to stay to the right side of the door. A short Chinese man in a beige bomber vest squeezed by, brushing Michael with his pot belly.

A pressure loosened in Michael’s ears as though he had just come down from a higher altitude. He shook his head, squinted his eyes shut and opened them again.

The Chinese man rose into the air, a look of wide-eyed wonder on his face, scuffing Michael in the chest with his right shoe and flailing his hand against Michael’s cheek. The man latched onto the railing. Michael felt his own feet rise from the floor.

“That’s just the gravitational constant,” the voice of the bus driver crackled on the PA system in a thick Francophone accent. “Hold onto a bar and keep moving towards the back. Keep moving towards the back, please.”

As if to affirm the news, many passengers floated upward. The man listening to his MP4 did not notice, his thick dreadlocks rising around him like an umbrella. A skinny teenaged boy snored in the back, leaning over a side seat with his arms crossed and his jaw slack, oblivious to the fact that he would soon thud against the ceiling with the small of his back. A brunette with her hair tied back jostled to the door, chatting on her silver cell phone, which slipped from her hand and rose above her head.

The baby at the front of the bus giggled. Michael spotted the boy in the jumper floating feet-first toward the bus driver above

everyone's heads. His mother yelped, clutched his foot and yanked him back.

The bus stopped. The doors sighed open.

Michael pushed the stranger out by his wet soles. A few more passengers floated after him, clearing the space by the doors.

Two tall, fat men in their 40s floated into Michael's field of vision.

"I'm telling you, Ralph," said the man with a round, plump face, and a head of white and brown hair, wagging an index finger at Ralph. "I cannot believe Foreman still has the heavyweight title. Oh! Excuse me."

Michael and the man traded a curt nod as Michael pulled himself up to the doors, and then traded a "Thank you" and a "You're welcome."

"The fight was pathetic!" the man continued. "The challenger was all over him the entire 12 rounds."

Ralph, even larger than his companion, with a head of red hair, hovered toward a young couple sitting across from Michael. He tapped the metal bars on the top of the bus seats to keep moving.

"Didn't he have the time problem?" asked Ralph.

The first man nodded. They hovered further toward the back, their baritone voices louder than the murmur of other conversations. "Halfway through the fight, it was the tenth round, then the ninth, then the eleventh. When they got back to round seven, Foreman looked rougher than ever. He's just too old. They should've tested him for time steroid use."

"I don't know," said Ralph, drifting toward the ceiling, much to the dismay of the seated passengers beneath him, who visibly stiffened at the sight of a 250-pound man hovering overhead. "He got the title for a reason."

The bus turned north up a main street and toward the downtown business district. Michael rang the bell clumsily using the string by the door. The bus stopped, the doors opened, and he floated out above the street, which was like a busy river in a canyon of tall, glassy office buildings. A mob of bus passengers boarded around him, a shadow passing across them.

Michael looked up.

A small sports car, a red Jetta, floated overhead, probably an older model without non-gravity adjusters. People who buy used cars that aren't safetied don't understand the gravity of the situation, he thought.

Michael held the edge of the roof of the bus shelter he had floated toward and shoved himself from there, at a height of eight feet from the sidewalk, from light post to light post down the street. Around

him, other commuters floated and negotiated the air. A newspaper flapped by, briefly revealing a color photo of an anemic blonde woman in a bikini, followed by a real-life French poodle with a bouffant hairdo and a tuft of tail. An elderly woman with a similar haircut did the front crawl behind the dog, yelling with each stroke. Michael thought it was like watching someone try to fly in a dream.

Michael passed her, reached a phone booth, grabbed a telephone post with both hands, and awkwardly pulled himself to the busy sidewalk. He was two feet from touching down when a cottony pressure returned in his ears.

Michael plummeted to the ground, landing on his right leg and arm and his rear.

Around him, similar accidents occurred in a cacophony of sounds —impact, curses and laughter. The lady with the poodle landed on the two large bus passengers, who were still discussing boxing.

A man screamed in a harsh, wailing note. A thunderous sound of crashing metal, plastic and glass came from down the block, shaking the sidewalk and rattling the glass of the bus shelters. Police sirens sounded in the distance.

Without looking back, Michael knew he had been lucky. Gravitational flux was a major cause of hundreds of accidental deaths every year, according to the All States polls.

His right shin hurt like hell and his forearm was scraped but not bleeding. Michael noted with disdain that he had scraped the elbow of his lucky maroon shirt. He brushed off the front of his pants, rose, assured his side satchel was still strung over his left shoulder, and walked toward the office.

* * * *

"Good day, Mr. Atkinson," said the man behind the desk. He had a receding hairline and a watermelon-shaped head. "I'm Jeremiah Steiner. Have a seat."

Michael entered the office doorway. Steiner stood, one large hand on the back of his brush cut, his other hand out, indicating the chairs in front of him. He wore a baby-blue suit, a mustard-yellow dress shirt, and a thin, orange tie with a narrow metal clip.

Michael thanked him. They shook hands perfunctorily, and Michael sat in the chair on the right.

An impressive window took up the entire wall behind the desk, showcasing a breathtaking view of the city skyline. Rows of glassy buildings marched in all directions. The streets 15 stories below bustled with traffic and pedestrians the sizes of ants. To the left was a

brown, 20-storey, box-shaped building with a logo, “Intel HR”, in large, thick, white letters at the top. To the right stood a row of skyscrapers whose silvery windows reflected the blue sky. In the distance, beyond the buildings, stood Parliament Hill. Behind that, the rolling hills of Hullatineau faded into the cobalt-colored horizon.

A tall, oak bookcase with rows of hardcover books with golden lettering on the spines stood to the left of Steiner’s desk. A mini-fridge stood in the other corner, along with a small magazine-and-newspaper-cluttered table and two chairs.

“So, Michael—is it okay if I call you that?” Steiner asked.

“Uh, yes,” Michael said quickly.

Steiner sat down, rubbed his palms together, and stared intently at him.

“Good. Care for anything to drink? Don’t be shy to speak up; I’m a little hard of hearing.”

“No thank you,” said Michael.

“Suit yourself,” said Steiner, reaching across the oak desk for a coffee mug. An aqua-colored pad lay in front of him, a phone to the left. In and Out files sat side-by-side on the right. A pile of manila folders and papers sat in the middle. Beside the phone stood a large, ornately framed photograph facing outward; Steiner beamed, wearing a short-sleeved shirt, his thick arm around a beaming woman with unnaturally orange hair, heavy red lipstick, and tight, black leather pants.

Steiner inhaled deeply, put his hands on the desk, scanning the papers quickly and, Michael thought, for the first time. After a moment, Steiner looked up again.

Michael was aware of silence, the smell of cigarettes and a cloying, musky cologne from the 1980s, a vintage brand named Brut.

“Why do you want to work for us?” Steiner asked. “What are some of the skills you can offer Time Company Incorporated?”

“My communications contracts have involved creating products, organizing events, raising the profiles of organizations, updating systems,” Michael said. “Between that and my financial and legal credentials, I have a lot to offer.”

“A lot to offer,” Steiner replied.

Michael was unsure whether his tone was mockery.

The man behind the desk nodded, his bulbous chin trying to escape from his tight collar. His bloated, pink face had a shaving nick just below the right ear. “You know what we do here, Mr. Acheson?”

“Atkinson.”

“Acherson,” replied Steiner. “You are aware of the power we try to harness and adapt?” He raised a bushy eyebrow that had more hair

than the top of his head. The rest of Steiner's hair had long since retreated to the back and sides in thin, brown strands.

Michael cleared his throat, keeping his voice and nerves steady. Steiner made him nervous.

"Yes, of course," he said. "I have an interest, a very great interest, in stabilizing the space-time continuum. I hear you people are the best. I want to be part of your team."

Michael gestured with his right hand as though signing his signature in thin air. "I can work independently and as a team player, and juggle several tasks simultaneously in a fast-paced environment under tight deadlines and amid changing priorities. It's a good fit."

Michael shrank back as though expecting a blow for his stock, job-description-matching statement.

"Trying to harness the space-time continuum?" Steiner asked rhetorically. "To stabilize it?" He covered his chin with his right hand. "Huh-hmmm!"

"Yes," Michael said hesitantly, more a question than affirmation.

Steiner guffawed loudly and cruelly and raised his palms. There was a spot of dried blood on his right hand from his shaving nick.

"Mr. Ackerley, as you are no doubt aware, we always keep our appointments. Unlike an interviewee who arrives 20 minutes late." He nodded toward a clock above the table to his left. The hands were stuck at 11:10.

Michael looked at his digital watch. It read 10:52. The clock's hand must have risen with the loss of gravity, he thought. When he looked at Steiner, Michael opened his mouth but the interviewer continued.

"We always stick to our schedules, even if the flux goes up and down 12 times a day. Even if time jumps from now to the medieval age, into the futuristic, I don't know, Hyper-Industrial Revolution. We are the Time Company, Mr. Acheson." He paused for drama, sounding like an old general in a film giving a monologue before a final battle. Michael was struck by his resemblance to Walter C. Scott. "And we want to control the ebb and flow of these changes. That is the aim of our market."

Steiner rubbed his palms together, making a sound of gritting sandpaper. "Our job is not to stabilize. No, not at all. Do you know why?"

Michael thought quickly, watching the two thick, gold rings on Mr. Steiner's index and middle finger.

"Because that would be bad for business?" Michael asked.

Steiner laughed quickly, derisively. "Bad for business?" His smile vanished like the sun behind a cloud. He leaned forward, clearing his papers to one side. "No! That would be apocalyptic for business.

Someone has to pick up the pieces. Someone has to keep paid services running. Someone has to make sure people keep paying, even if oxygen suddenly runs out. In fact, if oxygen does run out, send in the Oxygen Men and standardize the Global Positioning Price of oxygen!"

He straightened. There was spittle on the aqua note pad. Steiner's breath stank of avocado.

Michael leaned away.

"We have to adapt," Steiner continued. "Time will not adapt to us. I just met a young hotshot the other day, a fellow by the name of Ryan Daniel. He goes from town to town reviving dying Christian youth organizations. A self-made man in Europe. Doesn't get intimidated even if it's suddenly the Stone Age, or space aliens join the group. He's an example of what a young man—what you—can make of yourself in this day and age."

Steiner paused for a reaction, saw none forthcoming, and continued.

"Do you know how many parameters provide the conditions for human life, Mr. Anderson?"

"I believe there are 32," Michael replied, his stomach clenching. He wanted to fiddle with something with his restless hands.

A toothy smile broke out on Steiner's face, but was not complimentary. "Very good. Thirty-two conditions that make it possible for all of us to live—for you and I to sit here and chat, for Granny to get young Tommy to deliver her groceries. If one of these were to change—just one—as all other constants have altered and sporadically shifted for nearly 50 years, ever since the last lovable Pope passed on, we wouldn't say 'Boo' before dying in our sleep, on the bus, at work, or driving. We would get swept away, back to the dust where we all came from."

Steiner inhaled, exhaled and drank from his mug.

Michael smelled either cough medicine or bad vodka.

A pen floated from Steiner's desk and toward Michael. A few sheets of paper followed, seemingly in pursuit. Michael rose, but Steiner raised his right hand.

"Leave it," Steiner said, watching him coldly.

Michael snatched the pen from the air. It was a heavy, gold-encased ball-point pen imprinted with the Time logo. The logo blurred and changed to *Domtar Pulp and Paper Mill*. Michael's eyes grew. He looked up as the papers rose toward the speckle-patterned ceiling.

"I said 'Leave it'," Steiner repeated.

Michael fought a last urge to grab them and sat down.

Steiner crossed his arms. "What do you think of that, Mr. Atlinson?"

Unsure whether he meant the floating papers or the company

philosophy, Michael hedged his bets.

"It's good," replied Michael, replacing the pen on the desk under Steiner's studying gaze. "If change persists, then we have to be ready for it."

Steiner unfolded his arms, put his elbows on the desk, made a steeple shape with his fingers and stared over them at Michael. After a moment, he grunted and spoke.

"I don't think that this job is for you, Mr. Averson," he said, as though discussing the weather. "In this business, we seize opportunity, harness opportunity. You would rather see the potentially disastrous conditions gone, along with the golden opportunity."

Michael was speechless. He felt a pressure unlocking in his ears, as he always had before one of the universal constants changed in the space-time continuum. He had discovered years ago that many people did not have this same reaction to the shifting conditions of life, and so kept this ability to himself. Michael had lived his entire life under the Changing Thirty-Two Conditions, from different centuries merging with the current century to oxygen becoming carbon monoxide during one of the more perilous moments. The last thing he needed was this ape, Steiner, sermonizing about a fact of life that Michael had always endured.

He felt a horrific, stabbing ear ache. Between Michael's clenched stomach, sweaty palms, fidgeting hands and dry mouth, this painful episode was the last thing he needed in this job interview or moreover, lecture. The space-time continuum might be controllable, and people might try to capitalize on its unexpected changes, but he had his doubts—especially about leaving the matter in the hands of dumb, middle-aged white men in suits. He suspected that was how it all started with the space debris.

As this insight flashed through Michael's mind, he covered both ears with his hands.

"It's the way things are," said Steiner, watching Michael with curiosity. "Some of us aren't meant for greater things. I'm sure you'll find something suitable for someone with your, ah, skills."

Incoherent sounds, including roars, explosions, and inhuman cries, rose up from outside. Michael's stomach turned. He looked past Steiner to the city. The Hullatineau Hills were gone. Where they should have been, two jagged, towering volcanoes spouted bursts of red lava under a slate-grey sky. Dome-shaped mountains, a mix of tropical green and feces brown, surrounded the volcanoes. The terrible, loudening noises were drifting over from this jungle.

What Michael presumed was an airplane flew from the hills and over the city. The plane, though, had wide, flapping wings, a long, sharp beak, and round, sharp talons. The flying creature drifted just

right of the Parliament tower and disappeared from sight.

"Mr. Steiner—," Michael said, but Steiner cut him off.

"—Mr. Adleson, you're just not cut out for this business."

Michael felt panic hit him in a flash not unlike lightning. He rose, knocked his seat backward, and quickly retreated towards the door.

Michael had never seen a pterodactyl in real life, so when it came into view again, his blood froze. His temples pounded. The creature unleashed a high, ear-splitting cry that reverberated off the walls of the skyscraper canyon. Other creatures, invisible from the vantage point of the window, roared and mewled in the distance. The sounds from the streets below told their terrible stories. There was a smashing sound louder than that of a car falling from the sky. There was a whoosh from an explosion. Screams carried on the wind. Flames burst halfway up the side of the Intel building.

Steiner was still talking.

"…Mr. Achleson," he said, rising to his feet. He watched Michael open the office door. "There's no need to take things so hard. I'm sure there are sanitary cleaning employers who would be happy to enlist your particular services. But I would appreciate it if you would not take my pen with you."

"What?" Michael said, too busy watching the northern sky roil and listening to the sounds echo across the downtown core. A lime-green tail about 20 feet long swung out from behind the Excel building, below the enflamed floor. Two more pterodactyls circled the Parliament tower, chasing each other like children in a game of tag. They soared toward Steiner's building and overhead in a rush of wind. The glass rattled in its frame. A car honked repeatedly below. An alarm shrieked.

"Please return the pen, Mr. Aversyon," Mr. Steiner said. He stood stoically, refusing to face the chaos behind him. "It's merely another shift in the space-time continuum. There's nothing like the Dinosaur Age to liven up your schedule."

Michael looked down at the golden pen. He held it in a white-knuckled grip in his right hand. He looked back up at the window. A pterodactyl soared into the canyon of skyscrapers. It flapped its wings the size of tarpaulins with a sound of thunder. As it passed the window, Michael saw its fungus-green hide the texture of leather, and its beady, yellow eyes with black pupils

"My name is Michael Atinkson, you sorry, sanctimonious, son of a bitch," Michael said. "Here's your pen!"

Steiner's face dropped. His fat chin resembled a bobbing apple.

Michael threw the pen at him. The pen flipped through the air, caught a glint of sunlight, and bounced off the space between Steiner's eyes.

The nearby pterodactyl returned to view, passing from left to right, then veering toward the window. The light from the pen reflected off its cocked, soccer-ball-sized eye. The creature vanished from sight.

Steiner teetered backward, stunned and confused, his eyes closed and his mouth slack.

The deafening sound of giant, thrashing wings came from down the street.

Michael, having seen the winged creatures circle the tower and pass twice, saw with clarity what was happening. It's circling the block, he thought, a cold sensation in his gut, and coming back for another pass.

He stifled a scream and opened the door behind him. Steiner rubbed his own forehead.

"Run!" said Michael.

Steiner blinked and watched, blank-eyed. "Don't be afraid of change, son," he said.

Michael slammed the door.

He ran past the spacious reception lobby to the two elevators in the nearby hallway and hit the "Down" button between the doorways repeatedly. The doors opened. Michael leapt in, threw himself back to the wall and screwed his eyes shut. The doors shut with a skidding sound. The elevator descended.

He was out of breath and his heart was still running a sprint even though he had stopped.

The orchestral sound of glass shattering in Steiner's fifteenth-floor office did not occur until the elevator had descended two more floors. Someone yodeled in pain. Plaster clattered the top of the elevator with a sound like hailstones.

Michael was hyperventilating. The elevator descended. The sounds continued distantly, a heavy object bouncing off the roof every few seconds. Someone gripped his shoulder with warm, strong, reassuring fingers. He opened his eyes, heart hammering.

Michael turned to see a tall, black man with long dreadlocks standing in front of the elevator panel. The stranger removed his yellow headphones with his free hand. He looked at Michael imploringly with dark blue eyes.

"It will be okay," he said calmly. The stranger cocked his ear as though about to shake water out of it. He looked up and squinted one eye. "Yes, it will be okay now." He nodded repeatedly.

Michael recognized the gesture and noticed the stranger's long, dark sideburns and trim goatee. Michael's face must have given him away; the man produced a card from the back pocket of his jeans and handed it over.

“I knew it,” the stranger said. A wide, friendly grin spread on his face. “You were on the bus today. Call this number when you’re ready. There are a lot of us out here.”

Michael looked at the card as the elevator reached bottom.

A “ding” sounded. The doors opened. He looked up as the man removed his hand from Michael’s shoulder and stepped out, still smiling.

“Knew what?” Michael asked, baffled.

“That you were one of us. It’s a look you get with the conditions. We see the conditions coming, and we think we can probably even stop them.”

“But that would mean that people could control—,” Michael began.

The stranger nodded slowly. “Call us. See for yourself. That is, if you’re ready for a change from—” He nodded upward with a mock grimace, meaning the office building. “—this.”

Michael stared at him, the unspoken words from his own reply still on his lips.

“I knew it,” the stranger said, disappearing into the crowded, tumultuous lobby.

Michael scurried out past four tall, wide-shouldered firemen who inspected the elevator. He drifted outside through the jostling work crowd, which was also intent on leaving.

What did he mean? thought Michael. It had always felt like he was on the outside, broke, over-skilled, and unable to find work. It had felt like Michael would never find work. Putting the beige business card, which had only an eight-digit number typed in large, black figures, in his front pocket, he looked up and ended his self-pity.

A long fire truck blocked one end of the block. Just past the rig, an overturned car had impaled the side of a bus head-first. Flames licked up from the centre of the bus. A team of firefighters surrounded the accident, barking orders and aiming a hose at the blaze from either side. Paramedics carried people away on stretchers to waiting ambulances with flashing lights. Shattered glass covered the rest of the block, crunching under rushing feet. He didn’t have to look up to know where the glass had come from.

Michael looked in the other direction. A red-brick, four-storey apartment building had a circular hole in the corner between the third and fourth floor. Chunks of brick, wood and plastic littered the intersection below. A white fridge was visible in the apartment, covered with magnets shaped like lady bugs, as well as multi-colored sheets of paper. Across from the fridge stood a bookcase covered with chunks of brick, plaster and wood.

The birds of prey had done their damage here, too, Michael

thought. He felt strangely disappointed to know the sources of all the noise he had heard while in Steiner's office. Deciding he was only mildly concerned about what must have happened to Steiner, Michael walked toward the damaged apartment building.

The sounds of sirens, spraying water, yells and moans carried over the street in a pastiche of controlled chaos. A light spray permeated the humid block—part ash, part water and part debris. Michael coughed dryly. People scurried past. A Chinese man in a bomber vest stumbled into him and looked up, showing the rings beneath his eyes. He mumbled to himself before lurching away, his paunchy face streaked with dirt and tears.

"It will be okay," Michael said, but the man was much further down the block already.

With that statement, Michael realized what his job was. His problem had always been looking in the wrong places. Time to get home, Michael thought. I've got work to do.

SENSE OF OBLIGATION, by Harry Harrison

PART 1

CHAPTER I

A man said to the universe:
"Sir, I exist!"
"However," replied the universe,
"The fact has not created in me
A sense of obligation."

—Stephen Crane

* * * *

Sweat covered Brion's body, trickling into the tight loincloth that was the only garment he wore. The light fencing foil in his hand felt as heavy as a bar of lead to his exhausted muscles, worn out by a month of continual exercise. These things were of no importance. The cut on his chest, still dripping blood, the ache of his overstrained eyes —even the soaring arena around him with the thousands of spectators —were trivialities not worth thinking about. There was only one thing in his universe: the button-tipped length of shining steel that hovered before him, engaging his own weapon. He felt the quiver and scrape of its life, knew when it moved and moved himself to counteract it. And when he attacked, it was always there to beat him aside.

A sudden motion. He reacted—but his blade just met air. His instant of panic was followed by a small sharp blow high on his chest.

"*Touch!*" A world-shaking voice bellowed the word to a million waiting loud-speakers, and the applause of the audience echoed back in a wave of sound.

"One minute," a voice said, and the time buzzer sounded.

Brion had carefully conditioned the reflex in himself. A minute is not a very large measure of time and his body needed every fraction of it. The buzzer's whirr triggered his muscles into complete relaxation. Only his heart and lungs worked on at a strong, measured rate. His eyes closed and he was only distantly aware of his handlers catching him as he fell, carrying him to his bench. While they massaged his limp body and cleansed the wound, all of his attention was turned inward. He was in reverie, sliding along the borders of consciousness. The nagging memory of the previous night loomed up

then, and he turned it over and over in his mind, examining it from all sides.

It was the very unexpectedness of the event that had been so unusual. The contestants in the Twenties needed undisturbed rest, therefore nights in the dormitories were quiet as death. During the first few days, of course, the rule wasn't observed too closely. The men themselves were too keyed up and excited to rest easily. But as soon as the scores begin to mount and eliminations cut into their ranks, there is complete silence after dark. Particularly so on this last night, when only two of the little cubicles were occupied, the thousands of others standing with dark, empty doors.

Angry words had dragged Brion from a deep and exhausted sleep. The words were whispered but clear, two voices, just outside the thin metal of his door. Someone spoke his name.

"…Brion Brandd. Of course not. Whoever said you could was making a big mistake and there is going to be trouble—"

"Don't talk like an idiot!" This other voice snapped with a harsh urgency, clearly used to command. "I'm here because the matter is of utmost importance, and Brandd is the one I must see. Now stand aside!"

"The Twenties—"

"I don't give a damn about your games, hearty cheers and physical exercises. This is *important* or I wouldn't be here!"

The other didn't speak—he was surely one of the officials—and Brion could sense his outraged anger. He must have drawn his gun, because the other man said quickly, "Put that away. You're being a fool!"

"Out!" was the single snarled word of the response. There was silence then and, still wondering, Brion was once more asleep.

* * * *

"Ten seconds."

The voice chopped away Brion's memories and he let awareness seep back into his body. He was unhappily conscious of his total exhaustion. The month of continuous mental and physical combat had taken its toll. It would be hard to stay on his feet, much less summon the strength and skill to fight and win a touch.

"How do we stand?" he asked the handler who was kneading his aching muscles.

"Four… four. All you need is a touch to win!"

"That's all he needs, too," Brion grunted, opening his eyes to look at the wiry length of the man at the other end of the long mat. No one

who had reached the finals in the Twenties could possibly be a weak opponent, but this one, Irolg, was the pick of the lot. A red-haired, mountain of a man, with an apparently inexhaustible store of energy. That was really all that counted now. There could be little art in this last and final round of fencing. Just thrust and parry, and victory to the stronger.

Brion closed his eyes again and knew the moment he had been hoping to avoid had arrived.

Every man who entered the Twenties had his own training tricks. Brion had a few individual ones that had helped him so far. He was a moderately strong chess player, but he had moved to quick victory in the chess rounds by playing incredibly unorthodox games. This was no accident, but the result of years of work. He had a standing order with offplanet agents for archaic chess books, the older the better. He had memorized thousands of these ancient games and openings. This was allowed. Anything was allowed that didn't involve drugs or machines. Self-hypnosis was an accepted tool.

It had taken Brion over two years to find a way to tap the sources of hysterical strength. Common as the phenomenon seemed to be in the textbooks, it proved impossible to duplicate. There appeared to be an immediate association with the death-trauma, as if the two were inextricably linked into one. Berserkers and juramentados continue to fight and kill though carved by scores of mortal wounds. Men with bullets in the heart or brain fight on, though already clinically dead. Death seemed an inescapable part of this kind of strength. But there was another type that could easily be brought about in any deep trance—hypnotic rigidity. The strength that enables someone in a trance to hold his body stiff and unsupported except at two points, the head and heels. This is physically impossible when conscious. Working with this as a clue, Brion had developed a self-hypnotic technique that allowed him to tap these reservoirs of unknown strength. The source of "second wind," the survival strength that made the difference between life and death.

It could also kill. Exhaust the body beyond hope of recovery, particularly when in a weakened condition as his was now. But that wasn't important. Others had died before during the Twenties, and death during the last round was in some ways easier than defeat.

* * * *

Breathing deeply, Brion softly spoke the auto-hypnotic phrases that triggered the process. Fatigue fell softly from him, as did all sensations of heat, cold and pain. He could feel with acute sensitivity,

hear, and see clearly when he opened his eyes.

With each passing second the power drew at the basic reserves of life, draining it from his body.

When the buzzer sounded he pulled his foil from his second's startled grasp, and ran forward. Irolg had barely time to grab up his own weapon and parry Brion's first thrust. The force of his rush was so great that the guards on their weapons locked, and their bodies crashed together. Irolg looked amazed at the sudden fury of the attack —then smiled. He thought it was a last burst of energy, he knew how close they both were to exhaustion. This must be the end for Brion.

They disengaged and Irolg put up a solid defense. He didn't attempt to attack, just let Brion wear himself out against the firm shield of his defense.

Brion saw something close to panic on his opponent's face when the man finally recognized his error. Brion wasn't tiring. If anything he was pressing the attack. A wave of despair rolled out from Irolg— Brion sensed it and knew the fifth point was his.

Thrust—thrust—and each time the parrying sword a little slower to return. Then the powerful twist that thrust it aside. In and under the guard. The slap of the button on flesh and the arc of steel that reached out and ended on Irolg's chest over his heart.

Waves of sound—cheering and screaming—lapped against Brion's private world, but he was only remotely aware of their existence. Irolg dropped his foil, and tried to shake Brion's hand, but his legs suddenly gave way. Brion had an arm around him, holding him up, walking towards the rushing handlers. Then Irolg was gone and he waved off his own men, walking slowly by himself.

Except something was wrong and it was like walking through warm glue. Walking on his knees. No, not walking, falling. At last. He was able to let go and fall.

CHAPTER II

Ihjel gave the doctors exactly one day before he went to the hospital. Brion wasn't dead, though there had been some doubt about that the night before. Now, a full day later, he was on the mend and that was all Ihjel wanted to know. He bullied and strong-armed his way to the new Winner's room, meeting his first stiff resistance at the door.

"You're out of order, Winner Ihjel," the doctor said. "And if you keep on forcing yourself in here, where you are not wanted, rank or no rank I shall be obliged to break your head."

Ihjel had just begun to tell him, in some detail, just how slim his chances were of accomplishing that, when Brion interrupted them

both. He recognized the newcomer's voice from the final night in the barracks.

"Let him in, Dr. Caulry," he said. "I want to meet a man who thinks there is something more important than the Twenties."

While the doctor stood undecided, Ihjel moved quickly around him and closed the door in his flushed face. He looked down at the Winner in the bed. There was a drip plugged into each one of Brion's arms. His eyes peered from sooty hollows; the eyeballs were a network of red veins. The silent battle he fought against death had left its mark. His square, jutting jaw now seemed all bone, as did his long nose and high cheekbones. They were prominent landmarks rising from the limp grayness of his skin. Only the erect bristle of his close-cropped hair was unchanged. He had the appearance of having suffered a long and wasting illness.

"You look like sin," Ihjel said. "But congratulations on your victory."

"You don't look so very good yourself—for a Winner," Brion snapped back. His exhaustion and sudden peevish anger at this man let the insulting words slip out. Ihjel ignored them.

But it was true, Winner Ihjel looked very little like a Winner, or even an Anvharian. He had the height and the frame all right, but it was draped in billows of fat. Rounded, soft tissue that hung loosely from his limbs and made little limp rolls on his neck and under his eyes. There were no fat men on Anvhar and it was incredible that a man so gross could ever have been a Winner. If there was muscle under the fat, it couldn't be seen. Only his eyes appeared to still hold the strength that had once bested every man on the planet to win the annual games. Brion turned away from their burning stare, sorry now he had insulted the man without good reason. He was too sick though to bother about apologizing.

Ihjel didn't care either. Brion looked at him again and felt the impression of things so important that himself, his insults, even the Twenties were of no more interest than dust motes in the air. It was only a fantasy of sick mind, Brion knew, and he tried to shake the feeling off. The two men stared at each other, sharing a common emotion.

The door opened soundlessly behind Ihjel and he wheeled about, moving as only an athlete of Anvhar can move. Dr. Caulry was halfway through the door, off balance. Two more men in uniform came close behind him. Ihjel's body pushed against them, his speed and the mountainous mass of his flesh sending them back in a tangle of arms and legs. He slammed the door and locked it in their faces.

* * * *

"I have to talk to you," he said, turning back to Brion. "Privately," he added, bending over and ripping out the communicator with a sweep of one hand.

"Get out," Brion told him. "If I were able—"

"Well you're not, so you're just going to have to lie there and listen. I imagine we have about five minutes before they decide to break the door down, and I don't want to waste any more of that. Will you come with me offworld? There's a job that must be done, it's my job but I'm going to need help. You're the only one who can give me that help.

"Now refuse," he added as Brion started to answer.

"Of course I refuse," Brion said, feeling a little foolish and slightly angry, as if the other man had put the words into his mouth. "Anvhar is my planet—why should I leave? My life is here and so is my work. I also might add that I have just won the Twenties, I have a responsibility to remain."

"Nonsense. I'm a Winner and I left. What you really mean is you would like to enjoy a little of the ego-inflation you have worked so hard to get. Off Anvhar no one even knows what a Winner is—much less respects one. You have to face a big universe out there and I don't blame you for being a little frightened."

Someone was hammering loudly on the door.

"I haven't the strength to get angry," Brion said hoarsely. "And I can't bring myself to admire your ideas when they permit you to insult a man too ill to defend himself."

"I apologize," Ihjel said, with no hint of apology or sympathy in his voice. "But there are more desperate issues involved other than your hurt feelings. We don't have much time now, so I want to impress you with an idea."

"An idea that will convince me to go offplanet with you? That's expecting a lot."

"No, this idea won't convince you—but thinking about it will. If you really *consider* it you will find a lot of your illusions shattered. Like everyone else on Anvhar you're a Scientific Humanist with your faith firmly planted in the Twenties. You accept both of those noble institutions without an instant's thought. All of you haven't a single thought for the past, for the untold billions who led the bad life as mankind slowly built up the good life for you to lead. Do you ever think of all the people who suffered and died in misery and superstition while civilization was clicking forward one more slow notch?"

"Of course I don't think about them," Brion snapped back. "Why should I? I can't change the past."

"But you can change the future!" Ihjel said. "You owe something

to the suffering ancestors who got you where you are today. If Scientific Humanism means anything more than plain words to you, you must possess a sense of responsibility. Don't you want to try and pay off a bit of this debt by helping others who are just as backward and disease ridden today as great-grandfather Troglodyte ever was?"

The hammering on the door was louder, this and the drug-induced buzzing in Brion's ears made thinking difficult. "Abstractedly I, of course, agree with you," he said haltingly. "But you know there is nothing I can do personally without being emotionally involved. A logical decision is valueless for action without personal meaning."

"Then we have reached the crux of the matter," Ihjel said gently. His back was braced against the door, absorbing the thudding blows of some heavy object on the outside. "They're knocking, so I must be going soon. I have no time for details, but I can assure you, upon my word of honor as a Winner, that there is something you can do. Only you. If you help me, we might save seven million human lives. That is a fact…."

The lock burst and the door started to open. Ihjel shouldered it back into the frame for a final instant.

"…Here is the idea I want you to consider: Why is it that the people of Anvhar in a galaxy filled with warring, hate-filled, backward planets, should be the only ones who base their entire existence on a complicated series of games?"

CHAPTER III

This time there was no way to hold the door. Ihjel didn't try. He stepped aside and two men stumbled into the room. He walked out behind their backs without saying a word.

"What happened? What did he do?" the doctor asked, rushing in through the ruined door. He swept a glance over the continuous recording dials at the foot of Brion's bed. Respiration, temperature, heart, blood pressure—all were normal. The patient lay quietly and didn't answer him.

For the rest of that day, Brion had much to think about. It was difficult. The fatigue, mixed with the tranquilizers and other drugs had softened his contact with reality. His thoughts kept echoing back and forth in his mind, unable to escape. What had Ihjel meant? What was that nonsense about Anvhar? Anvhar was that way because…well it just was. It had come about naturally. Or had it? The planet had a very simple history.

From the very beginning there had never been anything of real commercial interest on Anvhar. Well off the interstellar trade routes, there were no minerals worth digging and transporting the immense

distances to the nearest inhabited worlds. Hunting the winter beasts for their pelts was a profitable but very minor enterprise, never sufficient for mass markets. Therefore no organized attempt had ever been made to colonize the planet. In the end it had been settled completely by chance. A number of offplanet scientific groups had established observation and research stations, finding unlimited data to observe and record during Anvhar's unusual yearly cycle. The long-duration observations encouraged the scientific workers to bring their families and, slowly but steadily, small settlements grew up. Many of the fur hunters settled there as well, adding to the small population. This had been the beginning.

Few records existed of those early days, and the first six centuries of Anvharian history were more speculation than fact. The Breakdown occurred about that time and in the galaxy-wide disruption, Anvhar had to fight its own internal battle. When the Earth Empire collapsed it was the end of more than an era. Many of the observation stations found themselves representing institutions that no longer existed. The professional hunters no longer had markets for their furs, since Anvhar possessed no interstellar ships of its own. There had been no real physical hardship involved in the Breakdown, as it affected Anvhar, since the planet was completely self sufficient. Once they had made the mental adjustment to the fact that they were now a sovereign world, not a collection of casual visitors with various loyalties, life continued unchanged. Not easy—living on Anvhar is never easy—but at least without difference on the surface.

The thoughts and attitudes of the people were however going through a great transformation. Many attempts were made to develop some form of stable society and social relationship. Again little record exists of these early trials, other than the fact of their culmination in the Twenties.

To understand the Twenties, you have to understand the unusual orbit that Anvhar tracks around its sun, 70 Ophiuchi. There are other planets in this system, all of them more or less conforming to the plane of the ecliptic. Anvhar is obviously a rogue, perhaps a captured planet of another sun. For the greatest part of its 780-day year it arcs far out from its primary, in a high-angled sweeping cometary orbit. When it returns there is a brief, hot summer of approximately eighty days before the long winter sets in once more. This severe difference in seasonal change has caused profound adaptations in the native life forms. During the winter most of the animals hibernate, the vegetable life lying dormant as spores or seeds. Some of the warm-blooded herbivores stay active in the snow-covered tropics, preyed upon by fur-insulated carnivores. Though unbelievably cold, the winter is a season of peace in comparison to the summer.

This is a time of mad growth. Plants burst into life with a strength that cracks rocks, growing fast enough for the motion to be seen. The snow fields melt into mud and within days a jungle stretches high into the air. Everything grows, swells, proliferates. Plants climb on top of plants, fighting for the life-energy of the sun. Everything is eat and be eaten, grow and thrive in the short season. Because when the first snow of winter falls again, ninety per cent of the year must pass until the next coming of warmth.

Mankind has had to adapt to the Anvharian cycle in order to stay alive. Food must be gathered and stored, enough to last out the long winter. Generation after generation had adapted until they look on the mad seasonal imbalance as something quite ordinary. The first thaw of almost-nonexistent spring triggers a wide reaching metabolic change in the humans. Layers of subcutaneous fat vanish and half-dormant sweat glands come to life. Other changes are more subtle than the temperature adjustment, but equally important. The sleep center of the brain is depressed. Short naps or a night's rest every third or fourth day become enough. Life takes on a hectic and hysterical quality that is perfectly suited to the environment. By the time of the first frost, rapid growing crops have been raised and harvested, sides of meat either preserved or frozen in mammoth lockers. With his supreme talent of adaptability mankind has become part of the ecology and guaranteed his own survival during the long winter.

Physical survival has been guaranteed. But what about mental survival? Primitive Earth Eskimos can fall into a long doze of half-conscious hibernation. Civilized men might be able to do this, but only for the few cold months of terrestrial mid-winter. It would be impossible to do during a winter that is longer than an Earth year. With all the physical needs taken care of, boredom became the enemy of any Anvharian who was not a hunter. And even the hunters could not stay out on solitary trek all winter. Drink was one answer and violence another. Alcoholism and murder were the twin terrors of the cold season, after the Breakdown.

It was the Twenties that ended all that. When they became a part of normal life the summer was considered just an interlude between games. The Twenties were more than just a contest—they became a way of life that satisfied all the physical, competitive and intellectual needs of this unusual planet. They were a decathlon—rather a doubled decathlon—raised to its highest power, where contests in chess and poetry composition held equal place with those in ski-jumping and archery. Each year there were two planet-wide contests held, one for men and one for women. This was not an attempt at sexual discrimination, but a logical facing of facts. Inherent differences prevented fair contests—for example, it is impossible for a woman to

win a large chess tournament—and this fact was recognized. Anyone could enter for any number of years, there were no scoring handicaps.

When the best man won he was really the best man. A complicated series of playoffs and eliminations kept contestants and observers busy for half the winter. They were only preliminary to the final encounter that lasted a month, and picked a single winner. That was the title he was awarded. Winner. The man—and woman—who had bested every other contestant on the entire planet and who would remain unchallenged until the following year.

* * * *

Winner. It was a title to take pride in. Brion stirred weakly on his bed and managed to turn so he could look out of the window. Winner of Anvhar. His name was already slated for the history books, one of the handful of planetary heroes. School children would be studying him now, just as he had read of the Winners of the past. Weaving daydreams and imaginary adventures around Brion's victories, hoping and fighting so some day equal them. To be a Winner was the greatest honor in the universe.

Outside, the afternoon sun shimmered weakly in a dark sky. The endless icefields soaked up the dim light, reflecting it back as a colder and harsher illumination. A single figure on skis cut a line across the empty plain; nothing else moved. The depression of the ultimate fatigue fell on Brion and everything changed, as if he looked in a mirror at a previously hidden side.

He saw suddenly—with terrible clarity—that to be a Winner was to be absolutely nothing. Like being the best flea, among all the fleas on a single dog.

What was Anvhar after all? An ice-locked planet, inhabited by a few million human fleas, unknown and unconsidered by the rest of the galaxy. There was nothing here worth fighting for, the wars after the Breakdown had left them untouched. The Anvharian had always taken pride in this—as if being so unimportant that no one else even wanted to come near you, could possibly be a source of pride. All the worlds of man grew, fought, won, lost, changed. Only on Anvhar did life repeat its sameness endlessly, like a loop of tape in a player….

Brion's eyes were moist, he blinked. *Tears!* Realization of this incredible fact wiped the maudlin pity from his mind and replaced it with fear. Had his mind snapped in the strain of the last match? These thoughts weren't his. Self-pity hadn't made him a Winner—why was he feeling it now? Anvhar was his universe—how could he even imagine it as a tag-end planet at the outer limb of creation? What had

come over him and induced this inverse thinking.

As he thought the question, the answer appeared at the same instant. Winner Ihjel. The fat man with the strange pronouncements and probing questions. Had he cast a spell like some sorcerer—or the devil in "Faust"? No, that was pure nonsense. But he had done something. Perhaps planted a suggestion when Brion's resistance was low. Or used subliminal vocalization like the villain in "Cerebrus Chained." Brion could find no adequate reason on which to base his suspicions. But he knew that Ihjel was responsible.

He whistled at the sound-switch next to his pillow and the repaired communicator came to life. The duty nurse appeared in the small screen.

"The man who was here today," Brion said, "Winner Ihjel, do you know where he is? I must contact him."

For some reason this flustered her professional calm. The nurse started to answer, excused herself, and blanked the screen. When it lit again a man in Guard's uniform had taken her place.

"You made an inquiry," the Guard said, "about Winner Ihjel. We are holding him here in the hospital following the disgraceful way in which he broke into your room."

"I have no charges to make. Will you ask him to come and see me at once?"

The Guard controlled his shock. "I'm sorry, Winner—I don't see how we can. Dr. Caulry left specific orders that you were not to be—"

"The doctor has no control over my personal life," Brion snapped at him. "I'm not infectious, or ill with anything more than extreme fatigue. I want to see that man. At once."

The Guard took a deep breath, and made a quick decision. "He is on the way up now," he said, and rung off.

* * * *

"What did you do to me?" Brion asked as soon as Ihjel had entered and they were alone. "You won't deny that you have put alien thoughts in my head?"

"No, I won't deny it. Because the whole point of my being here is to get those 'alien' thoughts across to you."

"Tell me how you did it," Brion insisted. "I must know."

"I'll tell you—but there are many things you should understand first, before you decide to leave Anvhar. You must not only hear them, you will have to believe them. The primary thing, the clue to the rest, is the true nature of your life here. How do you think the Twenties originated?"

Brion carefully took a double dose of the mild stimulant he was allowed before he answered. “I don’t think,” he said, “I know. It’s a matter of historical record. The founder of the games was Giroldi, the first contest was held in 378 A.B. The Twenties have been held every year since then. They were strictly local affairs in the beginning, but were soon well established on a planet-wide scale.”

“True enough,” Ihjel said, “but you’re describing *what* happened. I asked you *how* the Twenties originated. How could any single man take a barbarian planet, lightly inhabited by half-mad hunters and alcoholic farmers, and turn it into a smooth-running social machine built around the artificial structure of the Twenties? It just can’t be done.”

“But it was done!” Brion insisted. “You can’t deny that. And there is nothing artificial about the Twenties. They are a logical way to live a life on a planet like this.”

Ihjel had to laugh, a short ironic bark. “Very logical,” he said, “but how often does logic have anything to do with the organization of social groups and governments? You’re not thinking. Put yourself in founder Giroldi’s place. Imagine that you have glimpsed the great idea of the Twenties and you want to convince others. So you walk up to the nearest louse-ridden, brawling, superstitious, booze-embalmed hunter and explain clearly. How a program of his favorite sports—things like poetry, archery and chess—can make his life that much more interesting and virtuous. You do that. But keep your eyes open and be ready for a fast draw.”

Even Brion had to smile at the absurdity of the suggestion. Of course it couldn’t happen that way. Yet, since it had happened, there must be a simple explanation.

“We can beat this back and forth all day,” Ihjel told him, “and you won’t get the right idea unless—” He broke off suddenly, staring at the communicator. The operation light had come on, though the screen stayed dark. Ihjel reached down a meaty hand and pulled loose the recently connected wires. “That doctor of yours is very curious—and he’s going to stay that way. The truth behind the Twenties is none of his business. But it’s going to be yours. You must come to realize that the life you lead here is a complete and artificial construction, developed by Societics experts and put into application by skilled field workers.”

“Nonsense!” Brion broke in. “Systems of society can’t be dreamed up and forced on people like that. Not without bloodshed and violence.”

“Nonsense, yourself,” Ihjel told him. “That may have been true in the dawn of history, but not any more. You have been reading too many of the old Earth classics, you imagine that we still live in the

Ages of Superstition. Just because Fascism and Communism were once forced on reluctant populations, you think this holds true for all time. Go back to your books. In exactly the same era democracy and self-government were adapted by former colonial states, like India and the Union of North Africa, and the only violence was between local religious groups. Change is the lifeblood of mankind. Everything we today accept as normal was at one time an innovation. And one of the most recent innovations is the attempt to guide the societies of mankind into something more consistent with the personal happiness of individuals."

"The God complex," Brion said, "forcing human lives into a mold whether they want to be fitted into it or not."

"Societics can be that," Ihjel agreed. "It was in the beginning, and there were some disastrous results of attempts to force populations into a political climate where they didn't belong. They weren't all failures—Anvhar here is a striking example of how good the technique can be when correctly applied. It's not done this way anymore, though. Like all of the other sciences, we have found out that the more we know, the more there is to know. We no longer attempt to guide cultures towards what we consider a beneficial goal. There are too many goals, and from our limited vantage point it is hard to tell the good ones from the bad ones. All we do now is try to protect the growing cultures, give a little jolt to the stagnating ones—and bury the dead ones. When the work was first done here on Anvhar the theory hadn't progressed that far. The understandably complex equations that determine just where in the scale from a Type I to a Type V a culture is, had not yet been completed. The technique then was to work out an artificial culture that would be most beneficial for a planet, then bend it into the mold."

"But how?" Brion asked.

"We've made some progress—you're finally asking 'how'. The technique here took a good number of agents, and a great deal of money. Personal honor was emphasized in order to encourage dueling, this led to a heightened interest in the technique of personal combat. When this was well intrenched Giroldi was brought in, and he showed how organized competitions could be more interesting than haphazard encounters. Tying the intellectual aspects onto the framework of competitive sports was a little more difficult, but not overwhelmingly so. The details aren't important, all we are considering now is the end product. Which is you. You're needed very much."

"Why me?" Brion asked. "Why am I special? Because I won the Twenties? I can't believe that. Taken objectively there isn't that much difference between myself and the ten runners-up. Why don't you ask

one of them—they could do your job as well as I."

"No they couldn't. I'll tell you later why you are the only man I can use. Our time is running out and I must convince you of some other things first." Ihjel glanced at his watch. "We have less than three hours to dead-deadline. Before that time I must explain enough of our work to you to enable you to decide voluntarily to join us."

"A very tall order," Brion said. "You might begin by telling me just who this mysterious 'we' is that you keep referring to."

"The Cultural Relationships Foundation. A nongovernmental body, privately endowed, existing to promote peace and ensure the sovereign welfare of independent planets, so that all will prosper from the good will and commerce thereby engendered."

"Sounds like you're quoting," Brion told him. "No one could possibly make up something that sounds like that on the spur of the moment."

"I was quoting from our charter of organization. Which is all very fine in a general sense, but I'm talking specifically now. About you. You are the product of a tightly knit and very advanced society. Your individuality has been encouraged by your growing up in a society so small in population that only a mild form of government control is necessary. The normal Anvharian education is an excellent one, and participation in the Twenties has given you a general and advanced education second to none in the galaxy. It would be a complete waste of your entire life if you now took all this training and wasted it on some rustic farm."

"You give me very little credit. I plan to teach—"

"Forget Anvhar!" Ihjel cut him off with a chop of his hand. "This world will roll on quite successfully whether you are here or not. You must forget it, think of its relative unimportance on a galactic scale, and consider instead the existing, suffering, hordes of mankind. You must think what you can do to help them."

"But what can I do—as an individual? The day is long past when a single man, like Caesar or Alexander, could bring about world-shaking changes."

"True—but not true," Ihjel said. "There are key men in every conflict of forces, men who act like catalysts applied at the right instant to start a chemical reaction. You might be one of those men, but I must be honest and say that I can't prove it yet. So in order to save time and endless discussion, I think I will have to spark your personal sense of obligation."

"Obligation to whom?"

"To mankind of course, to the countless billions of dead who kept the whole machine rolling along that allows you the full, long and happy life you enjoy today. What they gave to you, you must pass on

to others. This is the keystone of humanistic morals."

"Agreed. And a very good argument in the long run. But not one that is going to tempt me out of this bed within the next three hours."

* * * *

"A point of success," Ihjel said. "You agree with the general argument. Now I apply it specifically to you. Here is the statement I intend to prove. There exists a planet with a population of seven million people. Unless I can prevent it, this planet will be completely destroyed. It is my job to stop that destruction, so that is where I am going now. I won't be able to do the job alone. In addition to others I need you. Not anyone like you—but you and you alone."

"You have precious little time left to convince me of all that," Brion told him, "so let me make the job easier for you. The work you do, this planet, the imminent danger of the people there—these are all facts that you can undoubtedly supply. I'll take a chance that this whole thing is not a colossal bluff and admit that given time, you could verify them all. This brings the argument back to me again. How can you possibly prove that I am the only person in the galaxy who can help you?"

"I can prove it by your singular ability, the thing I came here to find."

"What ability? I am different in no way from the other men on my planet."

"You're wrong," Ihjel said. "You are the embodied proof of evolution. Rare individuals with specific talents occur constantly in any species, man included. It has been two generations since an empathetic was last born on Anvhar and I have been watching carefully most of that time."

"What in blazes is an empathetic—and how do you recognize it when you have found it?" Brion chuckled, this talk was getting preposterous.

"I can recognize one because I'm one myself—there is no other way. As to how projective empathy works, you had a demonstration of that a little earlier, when you felt those strange thoughts about Anvhar. It will be a long time before you can master that, but receptive empathy is your natural trait. This is mentally entering into the feeling, or what could be called the spirit of another person. Empathy is not thought perception, it might better be described as the sensing of someone else's emotional makeup, feelings and attitudes. You can't lie to a trained empathetic because he can sense the real attitude behind the verbal lies. Even your undeveloped talent has

proved immensely useful in the Twenties. You can outguess your opponent because you know his movements even as his body tenses to make them. You accept this without ever questioning it."

"How do you know—?" This was Brion's understood, but never voiced secret.

Ihjel smiled. "Just guessing. But I won the Twenties too, remember, also without knowing a thing about empathy at the time. On top of our normal training, it's a wonderful trait to have. Which brings me to the proof we mentioned a minute ago. When you said you would be convinced if I could prove you were the only person who could help me. I *believe* you are—and that is one thing I cannot lie about. It's possible to lie about a belief verbally, to have a falsely based belief, or to change a belief. But you can't lie about it to yourself."

"Equally important—you can't lie about a belief to an empathetic. Would you like to see how I feel about this? 'See' is a bad word—there is no vocabulary for this kind of thing yet. Better, would you join me in my feelings? Sense my attitudes, memories and emotions just as I do?"

Brion tried to protest, but he was too late. The doors of his senses were pushed wide and he was overwhelmed.

"Dis…" Ihjel said aloud. "Seven million people…hydrogen bombs…Brion Brandd." These were just key words, land marks of association. With each one Brion felt the rushing wave of the other man's emotions.

There could be no lies here, Ihjel was right in that. This was the raw stuff that feelings are made of, the basic reactions to the things and symbols of memory.

DIS… DIS… DIS… it was a word it was a planet and the word thundered like a drum a drum the sound of its thunder surrounded and was

a wasteland a planet
of death a planet where
living was dying and
dying was very
better than
living
crude barbaric
backward miserable
dirty beneath
consideration
planet
DIS
hot burning scorching

wasteland of sands
and sands and sands and
sands that burned had burned
will burn forever
the people of this planet so
crude dirty miserable barbaric
subhuman in-human less-than-human
but
they
were
going
to
be
DEAD
and DEAD they would be seven million
blackened corpses that
would blacken your dreams
all dreams dreams
forever because those
H Y D R O G E N B O M B S
were waiting
to kill
them unless…unless…unless…
you Ihjel stopped it you Ihjel
(DEATH)…you (DEATH)…
you (DEATH) alone couldn't do
it you (DEATH)
must have

BRION BRANDD wet-behind-the-ears raw untrained-Brion Brand to help you he was the only one in the galaxy who could finish the job….

* * * *

As the flow of sensation died away, Brion realized he was sprawled back weakly on his pillows, soaked with sweat, washed with the memory of the raw emotion. Across from him Ihjel sat with his face bowed into his hands. When he lifted his head Brion saw within his eyes a shadow of the blackness he had just experienced.

"Death," Brion said. "That terrible feeling of death. It wasn't just the people of Dis who would die. It was something more personal."

"Myself," Ihjel said, and behind this simple word were the repeated echoes of night that Brion had been made aware of with his

newly recognized ability. “My own death, not too far away. This is the wonderfully terrible price you must pay for your talent. *Angst* is an inescapable part of empathy. It is a part of the whole unknown field of psi phenomena that seems to be independent of time. Death is so traumatic and final that it reverberates back along the time line. The closer I get, the more aware of it I am. There is no exact feeling of date, just a rough location in time. That is the horror of it. I *know* I will die soon after I get to Dis—and long before the work there is finished. I know the job to be done there, and I know the men who have already failed at it. I also know you are the only person who can possibly complete the work I have started. Do you agree now? Will you come with me?”

“Yes, of course,” Brion said. “I’ll go with you.”

CHAPTER IV

“I’ve never seen anyone quite as angry as that doctor,” Brion said.

“Can’t blame him,” Ihjel shifted his immense weight and grunted from the console, where he was having a coded conversation with the ship’s brain. He hit the keys quickly, and read the answer from the screen. “You took away his medical moment of glory. How many times in his life will he have a chance to nurse back to rugged smiling health the triumphantly exhausted Winner of the Twenties?”

“Not many, I imagine. The wonder of it is how you managed to convince him that you and the ship here could take care of me as well as his hospital.”

“I could never convince him of that,” Ihjel said. “But I and the Cultural Relationships Foundation have some powerful friends on Anvhar. I’m forced to admit I brought a little pressure to bear.” He leaned back and read the course tape as it streamed out of the printer. “We have a little time to spare, but I would rather spend it waiting at the other end. We’ll blast as soon as I have you tied down in a stasis field.”

The completeness of the stasis field leaves no impression on the body or mind. In it there is no weight, no pressure, no pain—no sensation of any kind. Except for a stasis of very long duration, there is no sensation of time. To Brion’s consciousness, Ihjel flipped the switch off with a continuation of the same motion that had turned it on. The ship was unchanged, only outside of the port was the red-shot blankness of jump space.

“How do you feel?” Ihjel asked.

Apparently the ship was wondering the same thing. Its detector unit, hovering impatiently just outside of Brion’s stasis field, darted down and settled on his forearm. The doctor back on Anvhar had

given the medical section of the ship's brain a complete briefing. A quick check of a dozen factors of Brion's metabolism was compared to the expected norm. Apparently everything was going well, because the only reaction was the expected injection of vitamins and glucose.

"Can't say I'm feeling wonderful yet," Brion answered, levering himself higher on the pillows. "But every day it's a bit better, steady progress."

"I hope so, because we have about two weeks before we get to Dis. Think you'll be back in shape by that time?"

"No promises," Brion said, giving a tentative squeeze to one bicep. "It should be enough time, though. Tomorrow I start mild exercise and that will tighten me up again. Now—tell me more about Dis and what you have to do there."

"I'm not going to do it twice, so just save your curiosity a while. We're heading for a rendezvous-point now to pick up another operator. This is going to be a three-man team, you, me and an exobiologist. As soon as he is aboard I'll do a complete briefing for you both at the same time. What you can do now is get your head into the language box and start working on your Disan. You'll want to speak it perfectly by the time we touch down."

* * * *

With an autohypno for complete recall, Brion had no difficulty in mastering the grammar and vocabulary of Disan. Pronunciation was a different matter altogether. Almost all the word endings were swallowed, muffled or gargled. The language was rich in glottal stops, clicks and guttural strangling sounds. Ihjel stayed in a different part of the ship, when Brion used the voice mirror and analysis scope, claiming that the awful noises interfered with his digestion.

Their ship angled through jump-space along its calculated course. It kept its fragile human cargo warm, fed them and supplied breathable air. It had orders to worry about Brion's health, so it did, checking constantly against its recorded instructions and noting his steady progress. Another part of the ship's brain counted microseconds with moronic fixation, finally closing a relay when a predetermined number had expired in its heart. A light flashed and a buzzer hummed gently but insistently.

Ihjel yawned, put away the report he had been reading, and started for the control room. He shuddered when he passed the room where Brion was listening to a playback of his Disan efforts.

"Turn off that dying brontosaurus and get strapped in," he called through the thin door. "We're coming to the point of optimum

possibility and we'll be dropping back into normal space soon."

The human mind can ponder the incredible distances between the stars, but cannot possibly contain within itself a real understanding of them. Marked out on a man's hand an inch is a large unit of measure. In interstellar space a cubical area with sides a hundred-thousand miles long is a microscopically fine division. Light crosses this distance in a fraction of a second. To a ship moving with a relative speed far greater than that of light, this measuring unit is even smaller. Theoretically it appears impossible to find a particular area of this size. Technologically it was a repeatable miracle that occurred too often to even be interesting.

Brion and Ihjel were strapped in when the jump-drive cut off abruptly, lurching them back into normal space and time. They didn't unstrap, just sat and looked at the dimly distant pattern of stars. A single sun, of apparent fifth magnitude was their only neighbor in this lost corner of the universe. They waited while the computer took enough star sights to triangulate a position in three dimensions, muttering to itself electronically while it did the countless calculations to find their position. A warning bell chimed and the drive cut on and off so quickly the two acts seemed simultaneous. This happened again, twice, before the brain was satisfied it had made as good a fix as possible and flashed a NAVIGATION POWER OFF light. Ihjel unstrapped, stretched and made them a meal.

Ihjel had computed their passage time with criminally precise allowances. Less than ten hours after they arrived a powerful signal blasted into their waiting receiver. They strapped in again as the NAVIGATION POWER ON signal blinked insistently.

A ship had paused in flight somewhere relatively near in the vast volume of space. It had entered normal space just long enough to emit a signal of radio query on an assigned wave length. Ihjel's ship had detected this and instantly responded with a verifying signal. The passenger spacer had accepted this assurance and gracefully laid a ten-foot metal egg in space. As soon as this had cleared its jump field the parent ship vanished towards its destination, light-years away.

Ihjel's ship climbed up the signal it had received. This signal had been recorded and examined minutely. Angle, strength and Doppler movement were computed to find course and distance. A few minutes of flight were enough to get within range of the far weaker transmitter in the dropcapsule. Homing on this signal was so simple, a human pilot could have done it himself. The shining sphere loomed up, then vanished out of sight of the viewports as the ship rotated to bring the space lock into line. Magnetic clamps cut in when they made contact.

"Go down and let the bug-doctor in," Ihjel said. "I'll stay and monitor the board in case of trouble."

"What do I have to do?"

"Get into a suit and open the outer lock. Most of the drop sphere is made of inflatable metallic foil so don't bother to look for the entrance. Just cut a hole in it with the oversize can opener you'll find in the tool box. After Dr. Morees gets aboard jettison the thing. Only get the radio and locator unit out first—it gets used again."

The tool did look like a giant opener. Brion carefully felt the resilient metal skin that covered the lock entrance, until he was sure there was nothing on the other side. Then he jabbed the point through and cut a ragged hole in the thin foil. Dr. Morees boiled out of the sphere, knocking Brion aside.

"What's the matter?" Brion asked.

There was no radio on the other's suit, he couldn't answer. But he did shake his fist angrily. The helmet ports were opaqued so there was no way to tell what expression went with the gesture. Brion shrugged and turned back to salvaging the equipment pack, pushing the punctured balloon free and sealing the lock. When pressure was pumped back to ship-normal he cracked his helmet and motioned the other to do the same.

"You're a pack of dirty lying dogs!" Dr. Morees said when the helmet came off. Brion was completely baffled. Dr. Lea Morees had long dark hair, large eyes and a delicately shaped mouth now taut with anger. Dr. Morees was a woman.

"Are you the filthy swine responsible for this atrocity?" Lea asked menacingly.

"In the control room," Brion said quickly, knowing when cowardice was much preferable to valor. "A man named Ihjel. There's a lot of him to hate, you can have a good time doing it. I just joined up myself—" He was talking to her back as she stormed from the room. Brion hurried after her, not wanting to miss the first human spark of interest in the trip to date.

"Kidnaped! Lied to and forced against my will! There is no court in the galaxy that won't give you the maximum sentence and I'll scream with pleasure as they roll your fat body into solitary—"

"They shouldn't have sent a woman," Ihjel said, completely ignoring her words. "I asked for a highly-qualified exobiologist for a difficult assignment. Someone young and tough enough to do field work under severe conditions. So the recruiting office sends me the smallest female they can find, one who'll melt in the first rain."

"I will not!" Lea shouted. "Female resiliency is a well known fact and I'm in far better condition than the average woman. Which has nothing to do with what I'm telling you. I was hired for a job in the university on Moller's World and signed a contract to that effect. Then this bully of an agent tells me the contract has been changed, read sub

paragraph 189-C or some such nonsense, and I'll be transshipping. He stuffed me into that suffocation basketball without a by-your-leave and they threw me overboard. If that is not a violation of personal privacy—"

"Cut a new course, Brion," Ihjel broke in. "Find the nearest settled planet and head us there. We have to drop this woman and find a man for this job. We are going to what is undoubtedly the most interesting planet an exobiologist ever conceived of, but we need a man who can take orders and not faint when it gets too hot."

Brion was lost. Ihjel had done all the navigating and Brion had no idea how to begin a search like this.

"Oh no you don't," Lea said. "You don't get rid of me that easily. I placed first in my class and most of the five-hundred other students were male. This is only a man's universe because the men say so. What is the name of this garden planet where we are going?"

"Dis. I'll give you a briefing as soon as I get this ship on course." He turned to the controls and Lea slipped out of her suit and went into the lavatory to comb her hair. Brion closed his mouth, aware suddenly it had been open for a long time. "Is that what you call applied psychology?" he asked.

"Not really. She was going to go along with the job in the end—since she did sign the contract even if she didn't read the fine print—but not until she had exhausted her feelings. I just shortened the process by switching her onto the male-superiority hate. Most women, who succeed in normally masculine fields, have a reflexive antipathy there, they have been hit on the head with it so much." He fed the course tape into the console and scowled. "But there was a good chunk of truth in what I said. I wanted a young, fit and highly qualified biologist from recruiting. I never thought they would find a female one. And it's too late to send her back now. Dis is no place for a woman."

"Why?" Brion asked, as Lea appeared in the doorway.

"Come inside, and I'll show you both," Ihjel said.

PART 2

CHAPTER V

"Dis," Ihjel said, consulting a thick file. "Third planet out from its primary, Epsilon Eridani. The fourth planet is Nyjord—remember that because it is going to be very important. Dis is a place you need a good reason to visit and no reason at all to leave. Too hot, too dry, the temperature in the temperate zones rarely drops below a hundred Fahrenheit. The planet is nothing but scorched rock and burning sand. Most of the water is underground and normally inaccessible. The surface water is all in the form of briny, chemically saturated swamps. Undrinkable without extensive processing. All the facts and figures are here in the folders and you can study them later. Right now I want you just to get the idea that this planet is as loathsome and inhospitable as they come. So are the people. This is a solido of a Disan."

Lea gasped at the three-dimensional representation on the screen. Not at the physical aspects of the man, as the biologist trained in the specialty of alien life she had seen a lot stranger sights. It was the man's pose, the expression on his face. Tensed to leap, his lips drawn back to show all of his teeth.

"He looks like he wanted to kill the photographer," she said.

"He almost did—just after the picture was taken. Like all Disans he has an overwhelming hatred and loathing of offworlders. Not without good reason though. His planet was settled completely by chance during the Breakdown. I'm not sure of the details, but the overall picture is clear, since the story of their desertion forms the basis of all the myths and animistic religions on Dis."

"Apparently there were large scale mining operations carried on there once, the world is rich enough in minerals and mining it is very simple." But water came only from expensive extraction processes and I imagine most of the food came from offworld. Which was good enough until the settlement was forgotten, the way a lot of other planets were during the Breakdown. All the records were destroyed in the fighting and the ore carriers pressed into military service. Dis was on its own. What happened to the people there is a tribute to the adaptation possibilities of Homo sapiens. Individuals died, usually in enormous pain, but the race lived. Changed a good deal, but still human.

"As the water and food ran out and the extraction machinery broke down, they must have made heroic efforts to survive. They

didn't do it mechanically, but by the time the last machine collapsed, enough people were adjusted to the environment to keep the race going. Third (Their? n. of transc.) descendants are still there, completely adapted to the environment. Their body temperatures are around one hundred and thirty degrees. They have specialized tissue in the gluteal area for storing water. These are minor changes compared to the major ones they have done in fitting themselves for this planet.

"I'm not sure of the exact details, but the reports are very enthusiastic about symbiotic relationships. They assure us that this is the first time Homo sapiens has been an active part of either commensalism or inquilinism other than in the role of host."

"Wonderful!" Lea enthused.

"Is it?" Ihjel scowled. "Perhaps from the abstract scientific point of view. If you can keep notes, perhaps you might write a book about it some time. But I'm not interested. I'm sure all these morphological changes and disgusting intimacies will fascinate you, Dr. Morees. But while you are counting blood types and admiring your thermometers, I hope you will be able to devote a little time to a study of the Disans' obnoxious personalities. We must either find out what makes these people tick—or we are going to have to stand by and watch the whole lot blown up!"

"Going to do what?" Lea gasped. "Destroy them? Wipe out this fascinating genetic pool? Why?"

"Because they are so incredibly loathsome, that's why!" Ihjel said. "These aboriginal hotheads have managed to lay their hands on some primitive cobalt bombs. They want to light the fuse and drop these bombs on Nyjord, the next planet. Nothing said or done can convince them differently. They demand unconditional surrender or else. This is impossible for a lot of reasons—most important because the Nyjorders would like to keep their planet for their very own. They have tried every kind of compromise but none of them work. The Disans are out to commit racial suicide. A Nyjord fleet is now over Dis and the deadline has almost expired for the surrender of the cobalt bombs. The Nyjord ships carry enough H-bombs to turn the entire planet into an atomic pile. That is what we must stop."

Brion looked at the solido on the screen, trying to make some judgment of the man. Bare, horny feet—a bulky, ragged length of cloth around the waist was the only garment. What looked like a piece of green vine was hooked over one shoulder. From a plaited belt were suspended a number of odd devices made of hand-beaten metal, drilled stone and looped leather. The only recognizable one was a thin knife of unusual design. Loops of piping, flared bells, carved stones tied in senseless patterns of thonging gave the rest of the collection a

bizarre appearance. Perhaps they had some religious significance. But the well-worn and handled look of most of them gave Brion an uneasy sensation. If they were used—what in the universe could they be used *for*?

"I can't believe it," he finally concluded. "Except for the exotic hardware, this lowbrow looks like he has sunk back into the stone age. I don't see how his kind can be of any real threat to another planet."

"The Nyjorders believe it, and that's good enough for me," Ihjel said. "They are paying our Cultural Relationships Foundation a good sum to try and prevent this war. Since they are our employers, we must do what they ask." Brion ignored this large lie, since it was obviously designed as an explanation for Lea. But he made an mental note to query Ihjel later about the real situation.

"Here are the tech reports." Ihjel dropped them on the table. "Dis has some spacers as well as the cobalt bombs—though these are the real threat. A tramp trader was picked up *leaving* Dis. It had delivered a jump-space launcher that can drop those bombs on Nyjord while anchored to the bedrock of Dis. While essentially a peaceful and happy people the Nyjorders were justifiably annoyed at this and convinced the tramp's captain to give them some more information. It's all here. Boiled down it gives a minimum deadline by which time the launcher can be set up and start throwing bombs."

"When is that deadline?" Lea asked.

"In ten days. If the situation hasn't been changed drastically by then the Nyjorders are going to wipe all life from the face of Dis. I assure you they don't want to do it. But they will drop the bombs in order to assure their own survival."

"What am I supposed to do?" Lea asked, annoyedly flipping the pages of the report. "I don't know a thing about nucleonics or jump-space. I'm an exobiologist with a supplementary degree in anthropology. What help could I possibly be?"

Ihjel looked down at her, fondling his jaw, fingers sunk deep into the rolls of flesh. "My faith in our recruiters is restored," he said. "That's a combination that is probably rare—even on Earth. You're as scrawny as an underfed chicken but young enough to survive if we keep a close eye on you." He cut off Lea's angry protest with a raised hand. "No more bickering. There isn't time. The Nyjorders must have lost over thirty agents trying to find the bombs. Our Foundation has had six people killed—including my late predecessor in charge of the project. He was a good man, but I think he went at this problem the wrong way. I think it is a cultural one, not a physical one."

"Run it through again with the power turned up," Lea said frowning. "All I hear is static."

"It's the old problem of genesis. Like Newton and the falling

apple, Levy and the hysteresis in the warp field. Everything has a beginning. If we can find out why these people are so hell-bent on suicide, we might be able to change the reasons. Not that I intend to stop looking for the bombs or the jump-space generator either. We are going to try anything that will avert this planetary murder."

"You're a lot brighter than you look," Lea said, rising and carefully stacking the sheets of the report. "You can count on me for complete co-operation. Now I'll study all this in bed if one of you overweight gentlemen will show me to a room with a strong lock on the inside of the door. Don't call me, I'll call you when I want breakfast."

* * * *

Brion wasn't sure how much of her barbed speech was humor and how much serious, so he said nothing. He showed her to an empty cabin—she did lock the door—then looked for Ihjel. The Winner was in the galley adding to his girth with an immense gelatin dessert that filled a good-sized tureen.

"Is she short for a native Terran?" Brion asked. "The top of her head is below my chin."

"That's the norm. Earth is a reservoir of tired genes. Weak backs, vermiform appendixes, bad eyes. If they didn't have the universities and the trained people we need, I would never use them."

"Why did you lie to her about the Foundation?"

"Because it's a secret—isn't that reason enough?" Ihjel rumbled angrily, scraping the last dregs from the bowl. "Better eat something. Build up the strength. The Foundation has to maintain its undercover status if it is going to accomplish anything. If she returns to Earth after this, it's better that she should know nothing of our real work. If she joins up, there'll be time enough to tell her. But I doubt if she will like the way we operate. Particularly since I plan to drop some H-bombs on Dis myself—if we can't turn off the war."

"I don't believe it!"

"You heard me correctly. Don't bulge your eyes and look moronic. As a last resort I'll drop the bombs myself, rather than let the Nyjorders do it. That might save them."

"Save them—they'd all be radiated and dead!" Brion's voice was raised in anger.

"Not the Disans. I want to save the Nyjorders. Stop clenching your fists and sit down and have some of this cake. It's delicious. The Nyjorders are all that counts here. They have a planet blessed by the laws of chance. When Dis was cut off from outside contact the

survivors turned into a gang of swamp-crawling homicidals. It did the opposite for Nyjord. You can survive there just by pulling fruit off a tree."

"The population was small, educated, intelligent. Instead of sinking into an eternal siesta they matured into a vitally different society. Not mechanical—they weren't even using the wheel when they were rediscovered. They became sort of cultural specialists, digging deep into the philosophical aspects of interrelationship. The thing that machine societies never have had time for. Of course this was ready made for the Cultural Relationships Foundation, and we have been working with them ever since. Not guiding so much as protecting them from any blows that might destroy this growing idea. But we've fallen down on the job."

"Nonviolence is essential to those people—they have vitality without needing destruction. But if they are forced to blow up Dis for their own survival—against every one of their basic tenets—their philosophy won't endure. Physically they'll live on. As just one more dog-eat-dog planet with an A-bomb for any of the competition who drop behind."

"Sounds like paradise now."

"Don't be smug. It's just another world full of people with the same old likes, dislikes and hatreds. But they are evolving a way of living together, without violence, that may some day form the key to mankind's survival. They are worth looking after. Now get below and study your Disan and read the reports. Get it all pat before we land."

CHAPTER VI

"Identify yourself, please." The quiet words from the speaker in no way appeared to coincide with the picture on the screen. The spacer that had matched their orbit over Dis had recently been a freighter. A quick conversion had tacked the hulking shape of a primary weapons turret on top of her hull. The black disk of the immense muzzle pointing squarely at them. Ihjel switched open the ship-to-ship communication channel.

"This is Ihjel. Retinal pattern 490-Bj4-67—which is also the code that is supposed to get me through your blockade. Do you want to check that pattern?"

"There will be no need, thank you. If you will turn on your recorder, I have a message relayed to you from Prime-four."

"Recording and out," Ihjel said "Damn! Trouble already and four days to blowup. Prime-four is our headquarters on Dis. This ship carries a cover cargo so we can land at the spaceport. This is probably a change of plan and I don't like the smell of it."

There was something behind Ihjel's grumbling this time, and without conscious effort Brion could sense the chilling touch of the other man's *angst*. Trouble was waiting for them on the planet below. When the message was typed by the decoder Ihjel hovered over it, reading each word as it appeared on the paper. He only snorted when it was finished and went below to the galley. Brion pulled the message out of the machine and read it.

> IHJEL IHJEL IHJEL SPACEPORT LANDING DANGER NIGHT LANDING PREFERABLE CO-ORDINATES MAP 46 J92 MN75 REMOTE YOUR SHIP VION WILL MEET END END END

Dropping into the darkness was safe enough. It was done on instruments and the Disans were thought to have no detection apparatus. The altimeter dials spun backwards to zero and a soft vibration was the only indication they had landed. All of the cabin lights were off except for the fluorescent glow of the instruments. A white-speckled gray filled the infrared screen, radiation from the still-warm sand and stone. There were no moving blips on it, nor the characteristic shape of a shielded atomic generator.

"We're here first," Ihjel said, opaquing the ports and turning on the cabin lights. They blinked at each other, faces damp with perspiration.

"Must you have the ship this hot?" Lea asked, patting her forehead with an already sodden kerchief. Stripped of her heavier clothing she looked even tinier to Brion. But the thin cloth tunic—reaching barely halfway to her knees—concealed very little. Small she may have appeared to him—unfeminine she was not. In fact she was quite attractive.

"Shall I turn around so you can stare at the back, too?" she asked Brion. Five days' experience had taught him that this type of remark was best ignored. It only became worse if he tried to answer.

"Dis is hotter than this cabin," he said, changing the subject. "By raising the interior temperature we can at least prevent any sudden shock when we go out—"

"I know the theory—but it doesn't stop me from sweating," she snapped.

"Best thing you can do is sweat," Ihjel said. He looked like a glistening captive balloon in shorts. Finishing a bottle of beer he took another from the freezer. "Have a beer."

"No thank you. I'm afraid it would dissolve the last shreds of tissue and my kidneys would float completely away. On Earth we never—"

"Get Professor Morees' luggage for her," Ihjel said. "Vion's

coming, there's his signal. I'm sending this ship up before any of the locals spot it."

* * * *

When he cracked the outer port the puff of air struck them like the exhaust from a furnace. Dry and hot as a tongue of flame. Brion heard Lea's gasp in the darkness. She stumbled down the ramp and he followed her slowly, careful of the weight of packs and equipment he carried. The sand burned through his boots, still hot from the day. Ihjel came last, the remote-control unit in his hand. As soon as they were clear he activated it and the ramp slipped back like a giant tongue. As soon as the lock had swung shut the ship lifted and drifted upwards silently towards its orbit, a shrinking darkness against the stars.

There was just enough starlight to see the sandy wastes around them, as wave-filled as a petrified sea. The dark shape of a sandcar drew up over a dune and hummed to a stop. When the door opened Ihjel stepped towards it and everything happened at once.

Ihjel broke into a blue nimbus of crackling flame, his skin blackening, charred, dead in an instant. A second pillar of flame bloomed next to the car and a choking scream, cut off even as it began. Ihjel died silently.

Brion was diving even as the electrical discharges still crackled in the air. The boxes and packs dropped from him and he slammed against Lea, knocking her to the ground. He hoped she had the sense to stay there and be quiet. This was his only conscious thought, the rest was reflex. Rolling over and over as fast as he could.

The spitting electrical flames flared again, playing over the bundles of luggage he had dropped. This time Brion was expecting it, pressed flat to the ground a short distance away. He was facing the darkness away from the sandcar and saw the brief, blue glow of the ion-rifle discharge. His own gun was in his hand. When Ihjel had given him the missile weapon he had asked no questions, just strapped it on. There had been no thought that he would need it this quickly. Holding it firmly before him in both hands he let his body aim at the spot where the glow had been. A whiplash of explosive slugs ripped the night air. They found their target and something thrashed voicelessly and died.

In the brief instant after he fired a jarring weight landed on his back and a line of fire circled his throat. Normally he fought with a calm mind, with no thoughts other than the contest. But Ihjel, a friend, a man of Anvhar, had died a few seconds earlier and Brion

found himself welcoming this physical violence and pain.

There are many foolish and dangerous things that can be done, such as smoking next to high octane fuel and putting fingers into electrical sockets. Just as dangerous, and equally deadly, is physically attacking a Winner of the Twenties.

Two men hit Brion together, though this made very little difference. The first died suddenly as hands like steel claws found his neck and in a single spasmodic contraction did such damage to the large blood vessels there that they burst and tiny hemorrhages filled his brain. The second man had time for a single scream, though he died just as swiftly when those hands closed on his larynx.

Running in a crouch, partially on his knuckles, Brion swiftly made a circle of the area, gun ready. There were no others. Only when he touched the softness of Lea's body did the blood anger seep from him. He was suddenly aware of the pain and fatigue, the sweat soaking his body and the breath rasping in his throat. Holstering the gun he ran light fingers over her skull, finding a bruised spot on one temple. Her chest was rising and falling regularly. She had struck her head when he pushed her. It had undoubtedly saved her life.

Sitting down suddenly he let his body relax, breathing deeply. Everything was a little better now, except for the pain at his throat. His fingers found a thin strand on the side of his neck with a knobby weight on the end. There was another weight on his other shoulder and a thin line of pain across his neck. When he pulled on them both the strangler's cord came away in his hand. It was thin fiber, strong as a wire. When it had been pulled around his neck it had sliced the surface skin and flesh like a knife, halted only by the corded bands of muscle below. Brion threw it from him, into the darkness where it had come from.

He could think again and he carefully kept his thoughts from the men he had killed. Knowing it was useless he went to Ihjel's body. A single touch of the scorched flesh was enough.

Behind him Lea moaned with returning consciousness and he hurried on to the sandcar, stepping over the charred body outside the door. The driver was slumped, dead, killed perhaps by the same strangling cord that had sunk into Brion's throat. He laid the man gently on the sand and closed the lids over the staring horror of the eyes. There was a canteen in the car and he brought it back to Lea.

* * * *

"My head—I've hurt my head," Lea said groggily.

"Just a bruise," he reassured her. "Drink some of this water and

you'll soon feel better. Lie back. Everything's over for the moment and you can rest."

"Ihjel's dead!" she said with sudden shocked memory. "They've killed him! What's happened?" She tensed, tried to rise, and he pressed her back gently.

"I'll tell you everything. Just don't try to get up yet. There was an ambush and they killed Vion and the driver of the sandcar, as well as Ihjel. Three men did it and they're all dead now, too. I don't think there are any more around, but if there are I'll hear them coming. We're just going to wait a few minutes until you feel better then we're getting out of here in the car."

"Bring the ship down!" There was a thin edge of hysteria in her voice. "We can't stay here alone. We don't know where to go or what to do. With Ihjel dead the whole thing's spoiled. We have to get out —"

There are some things that can't sound gentle, no matter how gently they are said. This was one of them. "I'm sorry, Lea, but the ship is out of our reach right now. Ihjel was killed with an ion gun and it fused the control unit into a solid lump. We must take the car and get to the city. We'll do it now. See if you can stand up—I'll help you."

She rose, not saying anything, and as they walked towards the car a single, reddish moon cleared the hills behind them. In its light Brion saw a dark line bisecting the rear panel of the sandcar. He stopped abruptly. "What's the matter?" Lea asked.

The unlocked engine cover could have only one significance and he pushed it open knowing in advance what he would see. The attackers had been very thorough and fast. In the short time available to them they had killed the driver and the car as well. Ruddy light shone on torn wires, ripped out connections. Repair would be impossible.

"I think we'll have to walk," he told her, trying to keep the gloom out of his voice. "This spot is roughly a hundred and fifty meters from the city of Hovedstad, where we have to go. We should be able to—"

"We're going to die. We can't walk anywhere. This whole planet is a death trap. Let's get back in the ship!" There was a thin shrillness of hysteria at the edge of her voice, as well as a subtle slurring of the sounds.

Brion didn't try to reason with her or bother to explain. She had a concussion from the blow, that much was obvious. He made her sit and rest while he made what preparations he could for the long walk.

Clothing first. With each passing minute the desert air was growing colder as the day's heat ebbed away. Lea was beginning to shiver and he took some heavier clothing from her charred bag and made her pull it on over her light tunic. There was little else that was

worth carrying. The canteen from the car and a first-aid kit he found in one of the compartments. There were no maps or radio. Navigation was obviously done by compass on this almost-featureless desert. The car was equipped with an electrically operated gyro-compass, of no possible use to him. He did use it to check the direction to Hovedstad, as he remembered it from the map, and found it lined up perfectly with the tracks the car had cut into the sand. It had come directly from the city. They could find their way by back-tracking.

Time was slipping away. He would like to have buried Ihjel and the men from the car, but the night hours were too valuable to be wasted. The best he could do was put the three corpses in the car, for protection from the Disan animals. Locking the door he threw the key as far as he could in the blackness. Lea had slipped into a restless sleep and he carefully shook her awake.

"Come," Brion said, "we have a little walking to do."

CHAPTER VII

With the cool air and firmly packed sand under foot walking should have been easy. Lea spoiled that. The concussion seemed to have temporarily cut off the reasoning part of her brain leaving a direct connection to her vocal cords. As she stumbled along, only half conscious, she mumbled all of her darkest fears that were better left unvoiced. Occasionally there was relevancy in her complaints. They would lose their way, never find the city, die of thirst, freezing, heat or hunger. Interspersed and entwined with these were fears from her past that still floated, submerged in the timeless ocean of her subconscious. Some Brion could understand, though he tried not to listen. Fears of losing credits, not getting the highest grade, falling behind, a woman alone in a world of men, leaving school, being lost, trampled among the nameless hordes that struggled for survival in the crowded city-states of Earth.

There were other things she was afraid of that made no sense to a man of Anvhar. Who were the alkians that seemed to trouble her? Or what was canceri? Daydle and haydle? Who was Mansean whose name kept coming up, over and over, each time accompanied by a little moan?

Brion stopped and picked her up in both arms. With a sigh she settled against the hard width of his chest and was instantly asleep. Even with the additional weight he made better time now, and he stretched to his fastest, kilometer-consuming stride to make good use of these best hours.

Somewhere on a stretch of gravel and shelving rock he lost the track of the sandcar. He wasted no time looking for it. By carefully

watching the glistening stars rise and set he had made a good estimate of the geographic north. Dis didn't seem to have a pole star, however a boxlike constellation turned slowly around the invisible point of the pole. Keeping this positioned in line with his right shoulder guided him on the westerly course he needed.

When his arms began to grow tired he lowered Lea gently to the ground, she didn't wake. Stretching for an instant, before taking up his burden again, Brion was struck by the terrible loneliness of the desert. His breath made a vanishing mist against the stars, all else was darkness and silence. How distant he was from his home, his people, his planet. Even the constellations of the night sky were different. He was used to solitude, but this was a loneliness that touched some deep-buried instinct. A shiver that wasn't from the desert cold touched lightly along his spine, prickling at the hairs on his neck.

It was time to go on. He shrugged the disquieting sensations off and carefully tied Lea into the jacket he had been wearing. Slung like a pack on his back it made walking easier. The gravel gave way to sliding dunes of sand that seemed to continue to infinity. A painful, slipping climb to the top of each one, then and equally difficult descent to the black-pooled hollow at the foot of the next.

* * * *

With the first lightening of the sky in the east he stopped, breath rasping in his chest, to mark his direction before the stars faded. One line scratched in the sand pointed due north, a second pointed out the course they should follow. When they were aligned to his satisfaction he washed his mouth out with a single swallow of water and sat on the sand next to the still form of the girl.

Gold fingers of fire searched across the sky, wiping out the stars. It was magnificent, Brion forgot his fatigue in appreciation. There should be some way of preserving it. A quatrain would be best. Short enough to be remembered, yet requiring attention and skill to compact everything into it. He had scored high with his quatrains in the Twenties. This would be a special one. Taind, his poetry mentor would have to get a copy.

"What are you mumbling about?" Lea asked, looking up at the craggy blackness of his profile against the reddening sky.

"Poem," he said. "*Shhh.* Just a minute."

It was too much for Lea, coming after the tension and dangers of the night. She began to laugh, laughing even harder when he scowled at her angrily. Only when she heard the tinge of growing hysteria did she make an attempt to break off the laughter. The sun cleared the

horizon, washing a sudden warmth over them. Lea gasped.

"Your throat's been cut! You're bleeding to death!"

"Not really," he said, touching his fingertips lightly against the blood-clotted wound that circled his neck. "Just superficial."

Depression sat on him as he suddenly remembered the battle and death of the previous night. Lea didn't notice his face. She was busy digging in the pack he had thrown down. He had to use his fingers to massage and force away the grimace of pain that twisted his mouth. Memory was more painful than the wound. How easily he had killed. Three men. How close to the surface of the civilized man the animal dwelled. In the countless matches he had used those holds, always drawing back from the exertion of the full killing power. They were part of a game, part of the Twenties. Yet when his friend had been killed he had become a killer himself. He believed in nonviolence and the sanctity of life. Until the first test when he had killed without hesitation. More ironic was the fact he really felt no guilt. Shock at the change, yes. But no more than that.

"Lift your chin," Lea said, brandishing the antiseptic applier she had found in the medicine kit. He lifted obligingly and the liquid drew a cool, burning line across his neck. Antibio pills would do a lot more good, since the wound was completely clotted by now, but he didn't speak his thoughts aloud. For the moment Lea had forgotten herself in taking care of him. He put some of the antiseptic on her scalp bruise and she squeaked, pulling back. They both swallowed the pills.

"That sun is hot already," Lea grumbled, peeling off her heavy clothing. "Let's find a nice cool cave to crawl into for the day."

"I don't think there are any here, just sand. We have to walk—"

"I know we have to walk," she interrupted angrily. "There's no need for a lecture about it. You're as seriously cubical as the Bank of Terra. Relax. Take ten and start again." Lea was making empty talk while she listened to the memory of hysteria tittering at the fringes of her brain.

"No time for that. We have to keep going." Brion climbed slowly to his feet after stowing everything in the pack. When he sighted along his marker at the western horizon he saw nothing to mark their course, only the marching dunes. He helped Lea to her feet and began walking slowly towards them.

"Just hold on a second," Lea called after him. "Where do you think you're going?"

"In that direction," he said pointing. "I hoped there would be some landmarks. There aren't. We'll have to keep on by dead reckoning. The sun will keep us pretty well on course. If we aren't there by night, the stars will be a better guide."

"All this on an empty stomach? How about breakfast? I'm hungry

—and thirsty."

"No food." He shook the canteen that gurgled emptily. It has been only partly filled when he found it. "The water's low and we'll need it later."

"I need it now," she snapped. "My mouth tastes like an unemptied ashtray and I'm dry as paper."

"Just a single swallow," he said. "This is all we have."

Lea sipped at it with her eyes closed in appreciation. He sealed the top and returned it to the pack without taking any himself. They were sweating as they started up the first dune.

The desert was barren of life; they were the only things moving under that merciless sun. Their shadows pointed the way ahead of them, and as the shadows shortened the heat rose. It had an intensity Lea had never experienced before, a physical weight that pushed at her with a searing hand. Her clothing was sodden with perspiration, and it trickled burning into her eyes. The light and heat made it hard to see and she leaned on the immovable strength of Brion's arm. He walked on steadily, apparently ignoring the heat and discomfort.

"I wonder if those things are edible—or store water?" Brion's voice was a harsh rasp. Lea blinked and squinted at the leathery shape on the summit of the dune. Plant or animal, it was hard to tell. The size of a man's head, wrinkled and gray as dried-out leather, knobbed with thick spikes. Brion pushed it up with his toe and they had a brief glimpse of a white roundness, like a shiny taproot, going down into the dune. Then the thing contracted, pulling itself lower into the sand. At the same instant something thin and sharp lashed out through a fold in the skin, striking at Brion's boot and withdrawing. There was a scratch on the hard plastic, beaded with drops of green liquid.

"Probably poison," he said, digging his toe into the sand. "This thing is too mean to fool with—without a good reason. Let's keep going."

* * * *

It was before noon when Lea fell down. She really wanted to go on, but her body wouldn't obey. The thin soles of her shoes were no protection against the burning sand and her feet were lumps of raw pain. Heat hammered down, poured up from the sand and swirled her in an oven of pain. The air she gasped in was molten metal that dried and cracked her mouth. Each pulse of her heart throbbed blood to the wound in her scalp until it seemed her skull would burst with the agony. She had stripped down to the short tunic—in spite of Brion's insistence that she keep her body protected from the sun—and that

clung to her, soaked with sweat. She tore at it in a desperate effort to breathe. There was no escape from the unending heat.

Though the baked sand burned torture into her knees and hands she couldn't rise. It took all her strength not to fall farther. Her eyes closed and everything swirled in immense circles.

Brion blinking through slitted eyes, saw her go down. He lifted and carried her again as he had the night before. The hot touch of her body shocked his bare arms. Her skin was flushed pink. Wiping his palm free of sweat and sand he touched her skin and felt the ominous hot dryness.

Heat-shock, all the symptoms. Dry, flushed skin, the ragged breathing. Her temperature rising quickly as her body stopped fighting the heat and succumbed.

There was nothing he could do here to protect her from the heat. He measured a tiny portion of the remaining water into her mouth and she swallowed convulsively. The thinnest of the clothing protected her slight body from the direct rays of the sun. After that he could only take her in his arms and keep on toward the horizon. An outcropping of rock there threw a tiny patch of shade and he walked toward it.

The ground here, shielded from the direct rays of the sun, felt almost cool by contrast. Lea opened her eyes when he put her down, peering up at him through a haze of pain. She wanted to apologize to him for her weakness, but no words came from the dried membrane of her throat. His body above her seemed to swim back and forth in the heat waves, swaying like a tree in a high wind.

Shock drove her eyes open, cleared her mind for the instant. He really was swaying. With sudden horror she realized how much she had come to depend on the eternal solidity of his strength. Now it was failing. All over his body the corded muscles contracted in ridges, striving to keep him erect. She saw his mouth pulled open by the taut cords of his neck and the gaping, silent scream was more terrible than any sound. Then she screamed herself as his eyes rolled back, leaving just the empty white of the eyeballs staring terribly at her. He went over, back down, like a felled tree, thudding heavily on the sand. Unconscious or dead she couldn't tell. She pulled limply at his leg, but couldn't drag his immense weight into the shade.

Brion lay on his back in the sun, sweating. Lea saw this and knew that he was still alive. Yet what was happening? She groped for memory in the red haze of her mind, but could remember nothing from her medical studies that would explain this. On every square inch of his body the sweat glands seethed with sudden activity. From every pore oozed great globules of oily liquid, far thicker than normal perspiration. Brion's arms rippled with motion and Lea stared,

horrified as the hairs there writhed and stirred as though endowed with separate life. His chest rose and fell rapidly, deep, gasping breaths wracking his body. Lea could only stare through the dim redness of unreality and wonder if she was going mad before she died.

A coughing fit broke the rhythm of his rasping breath, and when it was over his breathing was easier. The perspiration still covered his body, the individual beads touching and forming tiny streams that seeped down his body and vanished in the sand. He stirred and rolled onto his side, facing her. His eyes open and normal now as he smiled.

"Didn't mean to frighten you. It caught me suddenly, coming at the wrong season and everything. It was a bit of a jar to my system. I'll get you some water now, there's still a bit left."

"What happened? When you looked like that, when you fell—"

"Take two swallows, no more," he said, holding the canteen to her mouth. "Just summer change, that's all. Happens to us every year on Anvhar—only not that violently, of course. In the winter our bodies store a layer of fat under the skin for insulation and sweating almost ceases completely. Lot of internal changes, too. When the weather warms up the process is reversed. The fat is metabolized and the sweat glands enlarge and begin working overtime as the body prepares for two months of hard work, heat and little sleep. I guess the heat here triggered off the summer change early."

"You mean—you've adapted to this terrible planet?"

"Just about. Though it does feel a little warm. I'll need a lot more water soon, so we can't remain here. Do you think you can stand the sun if I carry you?"

"No, but I won't feel any better staying here." She was light-headed, scarcely aware of what she said. "Keep going, I guess. Keep going."

As soon as she was out of the shadow of the rock the sunlight burst over her again in a wave of hot pain. She was unconscious at once. Her slight weight was no burden to Brion and he made his best speed, heading toward the spot on the horizon where the sun would set. Without water he knew he could not last more than a day or two at best.

When sunset came he was still walking steadily. Only when the air chilled did he stop to dress them both in the warm clothes and push on. Lea regained consciousness in the cool night air and finished the last mouthfuls of water. She wanted to walk, but could only moan with pain when her burned feet touched the ground. He put ointment on them and wrapped them in cloth. They were too swollen to go back into the ragged shoes. Lifting his burden he walked on into the night, following the guiding stars.

* * * *

Except for the nagging thirst, it was an easy night. He wouldn't need sleep for two or three days more, so that didn't bother him. His muscles had a plentiful supply of fuel at hand in the no longer wanted subcutaneous fatty layer. Metabolizing it kept him warm. By running at a ground-eating pace whenever the footing was smooth he made good time. By dawn he was feeling a little tired and was at least ten kilos lighter due to the loss of the burned up fat.

There was no sight of the city yet. This was the last day. Massive as the adaptation of his body was to the climate, it still needed water to function. As his pores opened in the heat he knew the end was very close. Weaving, stumbling, trying not to fall with the unconscious girl, he climbed dune after unending dune. Before his tortured eyes the sun expanded and throbbed like a gigantic beating heart. He struggled to the top of the mountain of sand and looked at the Disan standing a few feet away.

They were both too surprised by the sudden encounter to react at once. For a breath of time they stared at each other, unmoving. When they reacted it was with the same defense of fear. Brion dropped the girl, bringing the gun up from the holster in the return of the same motion. The Disan jerked a belled tube from his waistband and raised it to his mouth.

Brion didn't fire. A dead man had taught him how to train his empathetic sense, and to trust it. In spite of the fear that wanted him to jerk the trigger, a different sense read the unvoiced emotions of the native Disan. There was fear there, and hatred. Welling up around these was a strong desire not to commit violence this time, to communicate instead. Brion felt and recognized all this in a small part of a second. He had to act instantly to avoid a tragic accident. A jerk of his wrist threw the gun to one side.

As soon as it was gone, he regretted his loss. He was gambling their lives on an ability he still was not sure of. The Disan had the tube to his mouth when the gun hit the ground. He held the pose, unmoving, thinking. Then he accepted Brion's action and thrust the tube back into his waistband.

"Do you have any water?" Brion asked, the guttural Disan words hurting his throat.

"I have water," the man said. He still didn't move. "Who are you?"

"We're from offplanet. We had… an accident. We want to go to the city. The water."

The Disan looked at the unconscious girl and made his decision. Over one shoulder he wore one of the green objects that Brion

remembered from the solido. He pulled it off and the thing writhed slowly in his hands. It was alive. A green length a meter long, like a noduled section of a thick vine. One end flared out into a petallike formation. The Disan took a hook-shaped object from his waist and thrust it into the petaled orifice. When he turned the hook in a quick motion the length of green writhed and curled around his arm. He pulled something small and dark out and threw it to the ground, extending the twisting green shape towards Brion. “Put your mouth to the end and drink,” he said.

Lea needed the water more, but he drank first, suspicious of the living water source. A hollow below the writhing petals was filling with straw-colored water from the fibrous, reedy interior. He raised it to his mouth and drank. The water was hot and tasted swampy. Sudden sharp pains around his mouth made him jerk the thing away. Tiny glistening white barbs projected from the petals, pink tipped now with his blood. Brion swung towards the Disan angrily—and stopped when he looked at the other man’s face. His mouth was surrounded by many small scars.

“The vaede does not like to give up its water, but it always does,” the man said.

Brion drank again then put the vaede to Lea’s mouth. She moaned without regaining consciousness, her lips seeking reflexively for the life-saving liquid. When she was satisfied Brion gently drew the barbs from her flesh and drank again. The Disan hunkered down on his heels and watched them expressionlessly. Brion handed back the vaede, then held some of the clothes so Lea was in their shade. He settled into the same position as the native and looked closely at him.

Squatting immobile on his heels, the Disan appeared perfectly comfortable under the flaming sun. There was no trace of perspiration on his naked, browned skin. Long hair fell to his shoulders and startlingly blue eyes stared back at Brion from deep-set sockets. The heavy kilt around his loins was the only garment he wore. Once more the vaede rested over his shoulder, still stirring unhappily. Around his waist was the same collection of leather, stone and brass objects that had been in the solido. Two of them now had meaning to Brion. The tube-and-mouthpiece; a blowgun of some kind. And the specially shaped hook for opening the vaede. He wondered if the other strangely formed things had equally realistic functions. If you accepted them as artifacts with a purpose—not barbaric decorations—you had to accept their owner as something more than the crude savage he resembled.

“My name is Brion. And you—”

“You may not have my name. Why are you here? To kill my people?”

Brion forced the memory of the last night away. Killing was just what he had done. Some expectancy in the man's manner, some sensed feeling of hope prompted Brion to speak the truth.

"I'm here to stop your people from being killed. I believe in the end of the war."

"Prove it."

"Take me to the Cultural Relationships Foundation in the city and I'll prove it. I can do nothing here in the desert. Except die."

For the first time there was emotion on the Disan's face. He frowned and muttered something to himself. There was a fine beading of sweat above his eyelids now as he fought an internal battle. Coming to a decision he rose, and Brion stood, too.

"Come with me. I'll take you to Hovedstad. But wait, there is one thing I must know. Are you from Nyjord?"

"No."

The nameless Disan merely grunted and turned away. Brion shouldered Lea's unconscious body and followed him. They walked for two hours, the Disan setting a cruel pace, before they reached a wasteland of jumbled rock. The native pointed to the highest tower of sand-eroded stone. "Wait near this," he said. "Someone will come for you." He watched while Brion placed the girl's still body in the shade, and passed over the vaede for the last time. Just before leaving he turned back, hesitating.

"My name is… Ulv," he said. Then he was gone.

Brion did what he could to make Lea comfortable, but it was very little. If she didn't get medical attention soon she would be dead. Dehydration and shock were uniting to destroy her.

CHAPTER VIII

Just before sunset Brion heard clanking, and the throbbing whine of a sandcar's engine coming from the west.

With each second the noise grew louder, coming their way. The tracks squeaked as the car turned around the rock spire, obviously seeking them out. A large carrier, big as a truck. It stopped before them in a cloud of its own dust and the driver kicked the door open.

"Get in here—and fast!" the man shouted. "You're letting in all the heat." He gunned the engine, ready to kick in the gears, looking at them irritatedly.

Ignoring the driver's nervous instructions, Brion carefully placed Lea on the rear seat before he pulled the door shut. The car surged forward instantly, a blast of icy air pouring from the air-cooling vents. It wasn't cold in the vehicle—but the temperature was at least forty degrees lower than the outer air. Brion covered Lea with all their extra

clothing to prevent any further shock to her system. The driver, hunched over the wheel and driving with an intense speed, hadn't said a word to them since they had entered.

Brion looked up as another man stepped from the engine compartment in the rear of the car. He was thin, harried looking. Pointing a gun.

"Who are you," he said, without a trace of warmth in his voice.

It was a strange reception, but Brion was beginning to realize that Dis was a strange planet. He sat, relaxed and unmoving, keeping his voice pitched low. The other man chewed at his lip nervously and Brion didn't want to startle him into pulling the trigger.

"My name is Brandd. We landed from space two nights ago and have been walking in the desert ever since. Now don't get excited and shoot the gun when I tell you this—but both Vion and Ihjel are dead."

The man with the gun gasped, his eyes widened. The driver threw a single frightened look over his shoulder then turned quickly back to the wheel. Brion's probe had hit its mark. If these men weren't from the Cultural Relationships Foundation, they at least knew a lot about it. It seemed safe to assume they were C.R.F. men.

"When they were shot the girl and I escaped. We were trying to reach the city and contact you. You are from the Foundation, aren't you?"

"Yes. Of course," the man said, lowering the gun. He stared glassy-eyed into space for a moment, nervously working his teeth against his lip. Startled at his own inattention he raised the gun again.

"If you're Brandd, there's something I want to know." Rummaging in his breast pocket with his free hand he brought out a yellow message form. He moved his lips as he reread the message. "Now answer me—if you can—what are the last three events in the"—he took a quick look at the paper again—"in the Twenties?"

"Chess finals, rifle prone position and fencing playoffs. Why?"

The man grunted and slid the pistol back into its holder, satisfied. "I'm Faussel," he said, and waved the message at Brion. "This is Ihjel's last will and testament, relayed to us by the Nyjord blockade control. He thought he was going to die and he sure was right. Passed on his job to you. You're in charge. I was Mervv's second-in-command, until he was poisoned. I was supposed to work for Ihjel and now I guess I'm yours. At least until tomorrow when we'll have everything packed and get off this hell planet?"

"What do you mean tomorrow?" Brion asked. "It's three days to deadline and we still have a job to do."

Faussel had dropped heavily into one of the seats and he sprang to his feet again, clutching the seat back to keep his balance in the swaying car.

“Three days, three weeks, three minutes—what difference does it make?” His voice rose shrilly with each word and he had to make a definite effort to master himself before he could go on. “Look. You don’t know anything about this. You just came and that’s your bad luck. My bad luck is being assigned to this death trap and watching the depraved and filthy things the natives do. And trying to be polite to them even when they are killing my friends, and those Nyjord bombers up there with their hands on the triggers. One of those bombardiers is going to start thinking about home and about the cobalt bombs down here and he’s going to press that button—deadline or no deadline.”

“Sit down, Faussel. Sit down and take a rest.” There was sympathy in Brion’s voice—but also the firmness of an order. Faussel swayed for a second longer, then collapsed. He sat with his cheek against the window, eyes closed. A pulse throbbed visibly in his temple and his lips worked. Under too much tension for too long a time.

* * * *

This was the atmosphere that hung heavily in the air at the C.R.F. building when they arrived. Despair and defeat. The doctor was the only one who didn’t share this mood as he bustled Lea off to the clinic with prompt efficiency. He obviously had enough patients to keep his mind occupied. With the others the feeling of depression was unmistakable. From the first instant they had driven through the automatic garage door Brion had swum in this miasma of defeat. It was omnipresent and hard to ignore.

As soon as he had eaten he went with Faussel into what was to have been Ihjel’s office. Through the transparent walls he could see the staff packing the records, crating them for shipment. Faussel seemed less nervous now that he was no longer in command. Brion rejected any idea he had of letting the man know that he was only a green novice in the Foundation. He was going to need all the authority he could muster, since they would undoubtedly hate him for what he was going to do.

“Better take notes of this Faussel, and have it typed. I’ll sign it.” The printed words always carried the most authority. “All preparations for leaving are to be stopped at once. Records are to be returned to the files. We are going to stay here just as long as we have clearance from the Nyjorders. If this operation is unsuccessful, we will all leave together when the time expires. We will take whatever personal baggage we can carry by hand, everything else stays here.

Perhaps you don't realize we are here to save a planet—not file cabinets full of papers." Out of the corner of his eye he saw Faussel flush, then angrily transcribe his notes. "As soon as that is typed bring it back. And all the reports as to what has been accomplished on this project. That will be all for now."

Faussel stamped out and a minute later Brion saw the shocked, angry looks from the workers in the outer office. Turning his back to them he opened the drawers in the desk, one after another. The top drawer was empty, except for a sealed envelope. It was addressed to Winner Ihjel.

Brion looked at it thoughtfully, then ripped it open. The letter inside was handwritten.

> Ihjel:
>
> I've had the official word that you are on the way to relieve me and I am forced to admit I feel only an intense satisfaction. You've had the experience on these outlaw planets and can get along with the odd types. I have been specializing in research for the last twenty years, and the only reason I was appointed planetary supervisor on Nyjord was because of the observation and application facilities. I'm the research type not the office type, no one has ever denied that.
>
> You're going to have trouble with the staff, so you had better realize that they are all compulsory volunteers. Half are clerical people from my staff. The others a mixed bag of whoever was close enough to be pulled in on this crash assignment. It developed so fast we never saw it coming. And I'm afraid we've done little or nothing to stop it. We can't get access to the natives here, not in the slightest. It's frightening! They don't fit! I've done Poisson Distributions on a dozen different factors and none of them can be equated. The Pareto Extrapolations don't work. Our field men can't even talk to the natives and two have been killed trying. The ruling class is unapproachable and the rest just keep their mouths shut and walk away.
>
> I'm going to take a chance and try to talk to Lig-magte, perhaps I can make him see sense. I doubt if it will work and there is a chance he will try violence with me, the nobility here are very prone to violence. If I get back all right, you won't see this note. Otherwise—good-by Ihjel, try to do a better job than I did.
>
> *Aston Mervv*

P.S. There is a problem with the staff. They are supposed to be saviors, but without exception they all loathe the Disans. I'm afraid I do, too.

Brion ticked off the relevant points in the letter. He had to find some way of discovering what Pareto Extrapolations were—without uncovering his own lack of knowledge. The staff would vanish in five minutes if they knew how green he was at the job. Poisson Distribution made more sense. It was used in physics as the unchanging probability of an event that would be true at all times. Such as the number of particles that would be given off by a lump radioactive matter during a short period. From the way Mervv used it in his letter it looked as if the Societics people had found measurable applications in societies and groups—at least on other planets. None of the rules seemed to be working on Dis. Ihjel had admitted that, and Mervv's death had proven it. Brion wondered who this Lig-magte was who appeared to have killed Mervv.

* * * *

A forged cough broke through Brion's concentration, and he realized that Faussel had been standing in front of his desk for some minutes. When Brion looked up at the man he was mopping perspiration from his face.

"Your air conditioner seems to be out of order," he said. "Should I have the mechanic look at it?"

"There's nothing wrong with the machine, I'm just adapting to Dis climate. Anything else, Faussel?"

The assistant had a doubting look that he didn't succeed in hiding. He also had trouble believing the literal truth. He placed the small stack of file folders on the desk.

"These are the reports to date, everything we have uncovered about the Disans. It's not very much; however, considering the antisocial attitudes on this lousy world, it is the best we could do." A sudden thought hit him, and his eyes narrowed slyly. "It can't be helped, but some of the staff have been wondering out loud about that native that contacted us. How did you get him to help you? We've never gotten to first base with these people and as soon as you land you have one working for you. You can't stop people from thinking about it, you being a newcomer and a stranger. After all, it looks a little odd…." He broke off in mid-sentence as Brion looked up in a cold fury.

"I can't stop people from thinking about it—but I can stop them

from talking. Our job is to contact the Disans and end this suicidal war. I have done more in one day than all of you have done since you arrived. I have accomplished this because I am better at my work than the rest of you. That is all the information any of you are going to receive. You are dismissed."

White with anger, Faussel turned on his heel and stamped out. Out to spread the word about what a slave-driver the new director was. They would then all hate him passionately which was just the way he wanted it. He couldn't risk exposure as the tyro he was. And perhaps a new emotion, other than disgust and defeat, might jar them into a little action. They certainly couldn't do any worse than they had been doing.

It was a frightening amount of responsibility. For the first time since setting foot on this barbaric planet Brion had time to stop and think. He was taking an awful lot upon himself. He knew nothing about this world, nor about the powers involved in the conflict. Here he sat pretending to be in charge of an organization he had first heard about only a few weeks earlier. It was a frightening situation. Should he slide out from under?

There was just one possible answer, and that was *no*. Until he found someone else who could do better, he seemed to be the one best suited for the job. And Ihjel's opinion had to count for something. Brion had felt the surety of the man's convictions that Brion was the only one who might possibly succeed in this difficult spot.

Let it go at that. If he had any qualms, it would be best to put them behind him. Aside from everything else there was a primary bit of loyalty involved. Ihjel had been an Anvharian and a Winner. Maybe it was a provincial attitude to hold in this great big universe—Anvhar was certainly far enough away from here—but honor is very important to a man who must stand alone. He had a debt to Ihjel and he was going to pay it off.

Once the decision had been made he felt easier. There was an intercom on the desk in front of him and he leaned with a heavy thumb on the button labeled *Faussel*.

"Yes?" Even through the speaker the man's voice was cold and efficient with ill-concealed hatred.

"Who is Lig-magte? And did the former director ever return from seeing him?"

"Magte is a title that means roughly noble or lord, Lig-magte is the local overlord. He has an ugly stoneheap of a building just outside the city. He seems to be the mouthpiece for the group of magter that are pushing this idiotic war. As to your second question I have to answer yes and no. We found Director Mervv's head outside the door next morning with all the skin gone. We knew it was him because the

doctor identified the bridgework in his mouth. *Do you understand?*"

All pretense of control had vanished and Faussel almost shrieked the last words. They were all close to cracking up, if he was any example. Brion broke in quickly.

"That will be all, Faussel. Just get word to the doctor that I would like to see him as soon as I can." He broke the connection and opened the first of the folders. By the time the doctor called he had skimmed the reports and was reading the relevant ones in greater detail. Putting on his warm coat he went through the outer office. The few workers still on duty turned their backs in frigid silence.

* * * *

Dr. Stine had a pink and shiny bald head that rose above a thick black beard. Brion liked him at once. Anyone with enough firmness of mind to keep a beard in this climate was a pleasant exception after what he had met so far.

"How's the new patient, doctor?"

Stine combed his beard with stubby fingers before answering. "Diagnosis: heat-syncope. Prognosis: complete recovery. Condition fair, considering the dehydration and extensive sunburn. I've treated the burns and a saline drip is taking care of the other. She just missed going into heat-shock. I have her under sedation now."

"I'd like to have her up and helping me tomorrow morning. Could she do this—with stimulants or drugs?"

"She could—but I don't like it. There might be side factors, perhaps long-standing debilitation. It's a chance."

"A chance we will have to take. In less than seventy hours this planet is due for destruction. In attempting to avert that tragedy I'm expendable as is everyone else here. Agreed?"

The doctor grunted deep in his beard and looked Brion's immense frame up and down. "Agreed," he said, almost happily. "It is a distinct pleasure to see something beside black defeat around here. I'll go along with you."

"Well you can help me right now. I checked the personnel roster and discovered that out of the twenty-eight people working here there isn't a physical scientist of any kind—other than yourself."

"A scruffy bunch of button-pushers and theoreticians. Not worth a damn for field work, the whole bunch of them!" The doctor toed the floor switch on a waste receptacle and spat into it with feeling.

"Then I'm going to depend on you for some straight answers," Brion said. "This is an un-standard operation and the standard techniques just don't begin to make sense. Even Poisson Distributions

and Pareto Extrapolations don't apply here." Stine nodded agreement and Brion relaxed a bit. He had just relieved himself of his entire knowledge of Societics and it had sounded authentic. "The more I look at it the more I believe that this is a physical problem; something to so with the exotic and massive adjustments the Disans have made to this hellish environment. Could this tie up in any way with their absolutely suicidal attitude towards the cobalt bombs?"

"Could it? Could it?" Dr. Stine paced the floor rapidly on his stocky legs, twining his fingers behind his back. "You are bloody well right it could. Someone is thinking at last and not just punching bloody numbers into a machine and sitting and scratching while waiting for the screen to light up with the answers. Do you know how Disans exist?" Brion shook his head no. "The fools here think it disgusting, but I call it fascinating. The have found ways to join in a symbiotic relationship with the life forms on this planet. Even a parasitic relationship. You must realize, that living organisms will do anything to survive. Castaways at sea will drink any liquid at all in their search for water. Disgust at this is only the attitude of the over-protected who have never experienced extreme thirst or hunger. Well, here on Dis you have a planet of castaways."

Stine opened the door of the pharmacy. "This talk of thirst makes me dry." With economically efficient motions he poured grain alcohol into a beaker, thinned it with distilled water and flavored it with some flavor crystals from a bottle. He filled two glasses and handed Brion one. It didn't taste bad at all.

"How do you mean parasitic, doctor? Aren't we all parasites of the lower life forms? Meat animals, vegetables and such?"

"No, no—you miss the point! I speak of parasitic in the exact meaning of the word. You must realize that to a biologist there is no real difference between a parasitism, symbiosis, mutualism, biontergasy, commensalism—"

"Stop, stop!" Brion said. "Those are just meaningless sounds to me. If that is what makes this planet tick, I'm beginning to see why the rest of the staff has that lost feeling."

"It is just a matter of degree of the same thing. Look. You have a kind of crustacean living in the lakes here, very much like an ordinary crab. It has large claws in which it holds anemones, tentacled sea animals with no power of motion. The crustacean waves these around to gather food, and eats the pieces they capture that are too big for them. This is biontergasy, two creatures living and working together, yet each capable of existing alone. Now, this same crustacean has a parasite living under its shell, a degenerated form of a snail that has lost all powers of movement. A true parasite that takes food from its host's body and gives nothing in return. Inside this snail's gut there is

a protozoan that lives off the snail's ingested food. Yet this little organism is not a parasite as you might think at first, but a symbiote. It takes food from the snail, but at the same time it secretes a chemical that aids the snail's digestion of the food. Do you get the picture? All these life forms exist in a complicated interdependence."

* * * *

Brion frowned in concentration, sipping at the drink. "It's making some kind of sense now. Symbiosis, parasitism and all the rest are just ways of describing variations of the same basic process of living together. And there is probably a grading and shading between some of these that make the exact relationship hard to define."

"Precisely. Existence is so difficult on this world that the competing forms have almost died out. There are still a few left, preying off the others. It was the co-operating and interdependent life forms that really won out in the race for survival. I say life forms with intent; the creatures here are mostly a mixture of plant and animal, like the lichens you have elsewhere. The Disans have a creature they call a vaede that they use for water when traveling. It has rudimentary powers of motion from its animal parts, yet uses photosynthesis and stores water like a plant. When the Disans drink from it the thing taps their blood stream for food elements."

"I know," Brion said wryly. "I drank from one. You can see my scars. I'm beginning to comprehend how the Disans fit into the physical pattern of their world, and I realize it must have all kinds of psychological effects on them. Do you think this has any effect on their social organization?"

"An important one. But maybe I'm making too many suppositions now, perhaps your researchers upstairs can tell you better, after all this is their field."

Brion had studied the reports on the social setup and not one word of them made sense. They were a solid maze of unknown symbols and cryptic charts. "Please continue, doctor," he insisted. "The Societics reports are valueless so far. There are factors missing. You are the only one I have talked to so far who can give me any intelligent reports or answers."

"All right then—be it on your own head. The way I see it you've got no society here at all, just a bunch of rugged individualists. Each one for himself, getting nourishment from the other life forms of the planet. If they have a society, it is orientated towards the rest of the planetary life—instead of towards other human beings. Perhaps that's why your figures don't make sense. They are setup for human

societies. In their relations with each other these people are completely different."

"What about the magter, the upper-class types who build castles and are causing all this trouble?"

"I have no explanation," Dr. Stine grumbled. "My theories hold water and seem logical enough up to this point. But the magter are the exception and I have no idea why. They are completely different from the rest of the Disans. Argumentative, bloodthirsty, looking for planetary conquest instead of peace. They aren't rulers, not in the real sense. They hold power because nobody else wants it. They grant mining concessions to offworlders because they are the only ones with a sense of property. Maybe I'm going out on a limb. But if you can find out *why* they are so different you may be onto the clue to our difficulties."

For the first time since his arrival Brion began to feel a touch of enthusiasm. Plus the remote possibility that there might even be a solution to the deadly problem. He drained his glass and stood up. "I hope you'll wake your patient early, doctor. You might be as interested in talking to her as I am. If what you told me is true, she could well be our key to the answer. Her name is Professor Lea Morees and she is just out from Earth with degrees in exobiology and anthropology, and has a head stuffed with vital facts."

"Wonderful!" Stine said. "I shall take care of the head not only because it is so pretty but because of its knowledge. Though we totter on the edge of atomic destruction I have a strange feeling of optimism —for the first time since I landed on this planet."

PART 3

CHAPTER IX

The guard inside the front entrance of the Foundation building jumped at the thunderous noise and reached for his gun. He dropped his hand sheepishly when he realized it was only a sneeze—though a gargantuan one. Brion came up, sniffling, huddling down into his coat. "I'm going out before I catch pneumonia," he said. The guard saluted dumbly and after checking his proximity detector screens he turned off the light and opened the door. Brion slipped out and the heavy portal thudded shut behind him. The street was still warm from the heat of the day and he sighed happily and opened his coat.

This was partially a reconnaissance trip—and partly to get warmed up. There was little else he could do in the building, the staff had long since retired. He had slept himself, for half an hour, and now was refreshed and ready to work. All of the reports he could understand had been read and reread until they were memorized. He could use the time now, while the rest of them were asleep, to get better acquainted with the main city of Dis.

As he walked the dark streets he realized how alien the Disan way of life was to everything he knew. This city—Hovedstad—literally meant "main place" in the native language. And that's all it was. It was only the presence of the offworlders that made it into a city. Building after building, standing deserted, bore the names of mining companies, traders, space transporters. None of them were occupied now. Some still had lights burning, switched on by automatic apparatus, others were as dark as the Disan structures. There weren't many of these native constructions and they seemed out of place among the rammed earth and prefab offworld buildings. Brion examined one that was dimly illumined by the light on the corner of VEGAN SMELTERS, LTD.

It consisted of a single large room, resting flat on the ground. There were no windows and the whole thing appeared to have been constructed of some sort of woven material plastered with stone-hard mud. There was nothing blocking the door and he was thinking seriously of going in when he became aware that he was being followed.

It was only a slight noise, almost lost in the night. Normally it would never have been noticed, but tonight Brion was listening with his entire body. Someone was behind him, swallowed up in the pools of darkness. Brion shrank back against the wall. There was very little

chance this could be anyone but a Disan. He had a sudden memory of Mervv's severed head as it had been discovered outside the door.

Ihjel had helped him train his empathetic sense and he reached out with it. It was difficult working in the dark, he could be sure of nothing. Was he getting a reaction—or just wishing for one? Why did it have a ring of familiarity to it. A sudden idea struck him.

"Ulv," he said, very softly. "This is Brion." He crouched, ready for any attack.

"I know," a voice said softly in the night. "Do not talk. Walk in the direction you were going before."

Asking questions now would accomplish nothing. Brion turned instantly and did as he was bidden. The buildings grew farther apart until he realized from the sand underfoot that he was back in the planet-wide desert. It could be a trap—he hadn't recognized the voice behind the whisper—yet he still had to take this chance. A darker shape appeared in the dark night near him, and a burning hot hand touched his arm lightly.

"We can talk here." The words were louder and this time Brion recognized the voice. "I have brought you to the city as I told you I would. Have you done as you said you would?"

"I am doing it—but I need your help, Ulv. It is your life that needs saving and you must do your part—"

"What is truth?" Ulv interrupted. "All I hear is difference. The magter have done well though they live the wrong way. I myself have had bronze from them and there is water just for going. Now they tell us they are getting a different world for us all from the sky people and that is good, too. Your people are the essence of evil and there is no harm in killing them."

"Why didn't you kill me when you had the chance?"

"I could have. But there is something more important. What is truth? What is on the papers that fall from the sky?" He sighed once, deeply. "There are black marks on them that some can tell meaning from. What did the ship voices mean when they said the magter were destroying the world and must be put down? I did not hear the voices, but I know one who did and he went to talk to Lig-magte which was foolish, because he was killed as he should have known he would be."

"The ships were telling you the truth, Ulv. The magter have bombs that will destroy Nyjord—the next planet—there." He pointed to the star newly rising in the east. "The bombs cannot be stopped. Unless the bombs are found or the magter drop their suicidal plans, this planet will burst into flames in three days time."

Ulv turned and started away. Brion called after him. "Wait. Will you help me stop this? How can I find you again?"

"I must think," the Disan answered still moving away. "I will find

you."

He was gone. Brion shivered in the sudden chill of the air, and wrapped the coat tighter around him. He started walking back towards the warmer streets of the city.

* * * *

It was dawn when he reached the Foundation building; a new guard was at the front entrance. No amount of hammering or threats could convince the man to open until Faussel came down, yawning and blinking with sleep. He was starting some complaint when Brion cut him off curtly and ordered him to finish dressing and report for work at once. Still feeling elated he steamed into his office and cursed the overly-efficient character who had turned on his air conditioner to chill the room again. When he turned it off this time he removed enough of the vital parts to keep it out of order for the duration.

When Faussel came in he was still yawning behind his fist. Obviously a low morning-sugar type. "Before you fall on your face, go out and get some coffee," Brion said. "Two cups. I'll have a cup, too."

"That won't be necessary," Faussel said, drawing himself up stiffly. "I'll call the canteen if you wish some." He said it in the iciest tone he could manage this early in the morning.

In his enthusiasm Brion had forgotten the hate campaign he had directed against himself. "Suit yourself," he snapped, getting back into the role. "But the next time you yawn there'll be a negative entry in your service record. If that's clear—you can brief me on this organization's visible relations with the Disans. How do they take us?"

Faussel choked and swallowed a yawn. "I believe they look on the C.R.F people as some species of simpleton, sir. They hate all offworlders, memory of their desertion has been passed on verbally for generations. So by their one-to-one logic we should either hate back or go away. We stay instead. And give them food, water, medicine and artifacts. Because of this they let us remain on sufferance. I imagine they consider us do-gooder idiots, and, as long as we cause no trouble, they'll let us stay." He was struggling miserably to suppress a yawn, so Brion turned his back and gave him a chance to get it out.

"What about the Nyjorders? How much do they know of our work?" Brion looked out the window at dusty buildings, outlined in purple against the violent colors of the desert sunrise.

"Nyjord is a co-operating planet, and has full knowledge at all executive levels. They are giving us all the aid they can."

"Well now is the time to ask for more. Can I contact the commander of the blockading fleet?"

"There is a scrambler connection right through to him. I'll set it up." Faussel bent over the desk and punched a number into the phone controls. The screen flowed with the black and white patterns of the scrambler.

"That's all, Faussel. I want privacy for this talk. What's the commander's name?"

"Professor Krafft, he's a physicist. They have no military men at all, so they called him in for the construction of the bombs and energy weapons. He's still in charge." Faussel yawned extravagantly as he went out the door.

The professor-commander was very old, with wispy gray hair and a network of wrinkles surrounding his eyes. His image shimmered then cleared as the scrambler units aligned.

"You must be Brion Brandd," he said. "I have to tell you how sorry we all are that your friend Ihjel—and the two others—had to die. After coming so far to help us. I'm sure you are very happy to have had a friend like that."

"Why…yes, of course," Brion said, reaching for the scattered fragments of his thought processes. It took an effort to remember the first conflict now that he was worrying about the death of a planet. "Very kind of you to mention it. But I would like to find out a few things about you, if I could."

"Anything at all, we are at your disposal. Before we begin though, I shall pass on the thanks of our council for your aid in joining us. Even if we are eventually forced to drop the bombs, we shall never forget that your organization did everything possible to avert the disaster."

Once again Brion was caught off balance. For an instant he wondered if Krafft was being insincere, then recognized the baseness of this thought. The completeness of the man's humanity was obvious and compelling. The thought passed through Brion's mind that now he had an additional reason for wanting the war ended without destruction on either side. He very much wanted to visit Nyjord and see these people on their home grounds.

* * * *

Professor Krafft waited, patiently and silently, while Brion pulled his thoughts together and answered. "I still hope that this thing can be stopped in time. That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I want to see Lig-magte and I thought it would be better if I had a legitimate reason. Are you in contact with him?"

Krafft shook his head. "No, not really in contact. When this

trouble started I sent him a transceiver so we could talk directly. But he has delivered his ultimatum, speaking for the *magter*. The only terms he will hear are unconditional surrender. His receiver is on but he has said that is the only message he will answer."

"Not much chance of him ever being told that," Brion said.

"There was—at one time. I hope you realize Brion that the decision to bomb Dis was not easily arrived at. A great many people—myself included—voted for unconditional surrender. We lost the vote by a very small margin."

Brion was getting used to these philosophical body blows and he rolled with the punches now. "Are there any of your people left on this planet? Or do you have any troops I can call on for help? This is still a remote possibility, but, if I do find out where the bombs or the launcher are, a surprise raid would knock them out."

"We have no people left in Hovedstad now—all the ones who weren't evacuated were killed. But there are commando teams standing by here to make a landing if the weapons are detected. The Disans must depend on secrecy to protect their armament since we have both the manpower and the technology to reach any objective. We also have technicians and other volunteers looking for the weapon sites. They have not been successful as yet, and most of them were killed soon after landing." Krafft hesitated for a moment. "There is another group that you should know about, you will need all the factors. There are some of our people in the desert outside of Hovedstad. We do not officially approve of them, though they have a good deal of popular support. Mostly young men, operating as raiders, killing and destroying with very little compunction. They are attempting to uncover the weapons by sheer strength of arms."

This was the best news yet. Brion controlled his voice and kept his expression calm when he spoke. "I don't know how far I can stretch your co-operation—but could you possibly tell me how to contact them?"

Krafft allowed himself a small smile. "I'll give you the wave length on which you can reach their radio. They call themselves the 'Nyjord Army.' When you talk to them you can do me a favor. Pass on a message. Just to prove things aren't bad enough—they've become a little worse. One of our technical crews has detected jump-space energy transmissions in the planetary crust. The Disans are apparently testing their projector, sooner than we had estimated. Our deadline has been revised by one day. I'm afraid there are only two days left before you must evacuate." His eyes were large with compassion. "I'm sorry. I know this will make your job that much harder."

Brion didn't want to think about the loss of a full day from his already small deadline. "Have you told the Disans this as yet?"

"No," Krafft told him. "The decision was reached just a few minutes before your call. It is going on the radio to Lig-magte now."

"Can you cancel the transmission and let me take the message in person?"

"I can do that," Krafft thought for a moment, "but it would surely mean your death at their hands. They have no hesitation in killing any of our people. I would prefer to send it by radio."

"If you do that, you will be interfering with my plans, and perhaps destroying them under the guise of saving my life. Isn't my life my own—to dispose of as I will?"

For the first time, Professor Krafft was upset. "I'm sorry, terribly sorry. I'm letting my concerns and worry wash over into my public affairs. Of course you may do as you please. I could never think of stopping you." He turned and said something inaudible offscreen. "The call is cancelled. The responsibility is yours. All our wishes for success go with you. End of transmission."

"End of transmission," Brion said, and the screen went dark.

"Faussel!" he shouted into the intercom. "Get me the best and fastest sandcar we have, a driver who knows his way around and two men, who can handle a gun and know how to take orders. We're going to get some positive action at last."

CHAPTER X

"It's suicide," the taller guard grumbled.

"Mine not yours, so don't worry about it," Brion snapped at him. "Your job is to remember your orders and keep them straight. Now—let's hear them again."

The guard rolled his eyes up in silent rebellion and repeated in a toneless voice. "We stay here in the car and keep the motor running while you go inside the stone pile there. We don't let anybody in the car and we try and keep them clear of the car—short of shooting them that is. We don't come in no matter what happens or what it looks like, but wait for you here. Unless you call on the radio in which case we come in with the automatics going and shoot the place up and it doesn't matter who we hit. This will only be used as a last resort."

"See if you can't arrange that last resort thing if you can," the other guard said, patting the heavy blue barrel of his weapon.

"I meant that *last* resort," Brion said angrily. "If any guns go off without my permission, you will pay for it and pay with your necks. I want that clearly understood. You are here as a rear guard and a base for me to get back to. This is my operation and mine alone—unless I call you in. Understood?"

He waited until all three men had nodded in agreement, then

checked the charge on his gun. Fully loaded. It would be foolish not to go in armed. But he had to. One gun wouldn't save him. He put it aside. The button radio on his collar was working and had a strong enough signal to get through any number of walls. He took off his coat, threw open the door and stepped out into the searing brilliance of the Disan noon.

There was only the desert silence, broken by the steady throb of the car's motor behind him. Stretching away to the horizon in every direction were the eternal deserts of sand. The keep stood nearby, solitary, a massive pile of black rocks. Brion plodded closer, watching for any motion from the walls. Nothing stirred. The high-walled, irregularly shaped construction sat in a ponderous silence. Brion was sweating now, only partially from the heat.

He circled the thing, looking for a gate. There wasn't one at ground level. A slanting cleft in the stone could be climbed easily, but it seemed incredible that this might be the only entrance. A complete circuit proved that it was. Brion looked unhappily at the slanting and broken ramp, then cupped his hands and shouted loudly.

"I'm coming up. Your radio doesn't work any more. I'm bringing the message from Nyjord that you have been waiting to hear." A slight bending of the truth without fracturing it. There was no answer. Just the hiss of wind-blown sand against the rock and the mutter of the car in the background. He started to climb.

The rock underfoot was crumbling and he had to watch where he put his feet. At the same time he fought a constant impulse to look up, watching for anything falling from above. Nothing happened. When he reached the top of the wall he was breathing hard, sweat moistened his body. There was still no one in sight. He stood on an unevenly shaped wall that appeared to circle the building. Instead of a courtyard inside it, the wall was the outer face of the structure, the domed roof rising from it. At varying intervals dark openings gave access to the interior. When Brion looked down the sandcar was just a dun-colored bump in the desert, already far behind him.

Stooping, he went through the nearest door. There was still no one in sight. The room inside was something out of a madman's funhouse. It was higher than it was wide, irregular, and more like a hallway than a room. At one end it merged into an incline that became a stairwell. The other ended in a hole that vanished in darkness below. Light of sorts filtered in through slots and holes drilled into the thick stone wall. Everything was built of the same crumble-textured but strong rock. Brion took the stairs. After a number of blind passages and wrong turns he saw a stronger light ahead. There was food, metal, even artifacts of the unusual Disan design in the different rooms he passed through. Yet no people. The

light ahead grew stronger as he approached, the passageway opening and swelling out until it met the larger central chamber.

This was the heart of the strange structure. All the rooms, passageways and halls existed just to give form to this gigantic hall. The walls rose sharply, the room circular in cross section and growing narrower towards the top. It was a truncated cone since there was no ceiling; a hot blue disk of sky cast light on the floor below.

On the floor stood a knot of men staring at Brion.

Out of the corner of his eyes, and with the very periphery of his consciousness, he was aware of the rest of the room. Barrels, stores, machinery, a radio transceiver, various bundles and heaps that made no sense at first glance. There was no time to look closer. Every fraction of his attention was focused on the muffled and hooded men.

He had found the enemy.

* * * *

Everything that happened to him so far on Dis had been preparation for this moment. The attack in the desert, the escape, the dreadful heat of sun and sand. All this had tempered and prepared him. It had been nothing in itself. Now the battle would begin in earnest.

None of this was conscious. His fighter's reflexes bent his shoulders, curved his hands before him as he walked softly in balance, ready to spring in any direction. Yet none of this was really necessary. All the danger so far was nonphysical. When he gave this thought conscious thought he stopped, startled. What was wrong here? None of the men had moved or made a sound. How could he even know they were men? They were so muffled and wrapped in cloth that only their eyes were exposed.

No doubt existed in Brion's mind. In spite of muffled cloth and silence he knew them for what they were. The eyes were empty of expression and unmoving, yet filled with the same negative emptiness as a bird of prey. They could look on life, death, and the rending of flesh with the same lack of interest and compassion. All this Brion knew in an instant of time, without words being spoken. Between the time he lifted one foot and walked a step he understood what he had to face. There could be no doubt, not to an empathetic.

From the group of silent men poured a frost-white wave of unemotion. An empathetic shares what other men feel. He gets his knowledge of their reaction by sensing lightly their emotions, the surges of interest, hate, love, fear, desire, the sweep of large and small sensations that accompany all thought and action. The empathetic is

always aware of this constant and silent surge, whether he makes the effort to understand it or not. He is like a man glancing across the open pages of a tableful of books. He can see that the type, words, paragraphs, thoughts are there even without focusing his attention to understand any of it.

Then how does the man feel when he glances at the open books and sees only blank pages? The books are there—the words are not. He turns the pages of one, then others, flipping pages, searching for meaning. There is no meaning. All of the pages are blank.

This was the way in which the magter were blank, without emotions. There was a barely sensed surge and return that must have been neural impulses on a basic level. The automatic adjustments of nerve and muscle that keep an organism alive. Nothing more. Brion reached for other sensations and there was nothing there to grasp. Either these men were apparently without emotions or they were able to block them from his detection, it was impossible to tell which.

Very little time has passed in the objective world while Brion made these discoveries. The knot of men still looked at him, silent and unmoving. They weren't expectant, their attitude could not have been called interest. But he had come to them and now they waited to find out why. Any questions or statements they spoke would be redundant, so they didn't speak. The responsibility was his.

"I have come to talk with Lig-magte. Who is he?" Brion didn't like the tiny sound his voice made in the immense room.

One of the men gave a slight motion to draw attention to himself. None of the others moved. They still waited.

"I have a message for you," Brion said, talking slowly to fill the silence of the room and the emptiness of his thoughts. This had to be handled right. But what was right? "I'm from the Foundation in the city, as you undoubtedly know. I've been talking to the people on Nyjord. They have a message for you."

The silence grew longer. Brion had no intention of making this a monologue. He needed facts to operate, to form an opinion. Looking at the silent forms was telling him nothing. Time stretched taut and finally Lig-magte spoke.

"The Nyjorders are going to surrender."

It was an impossibly strange sentence. Brion had never realized before how much of the content of speech was made up of emotion. If the man had given it a positive emphasis, perhaps said it with enthusiasm, it would have meant, "Success! The enemy is going to surrender!" This wasn't the meaning.

With a rising inflection on the end it would have been a question. "Are they going to surrender?" It was neither of these. The sentence carried no other message than that contained in the simplest meanings

of the separate words. It had intellectual connotations, but these could only be gained from past knowledge, not from the sound of the words. There was only one message they were prepared to receive from Nyjord. Therefore, Brion was bringing the message. If that was not the message Brion was bringing, the men here were not interested.

This was the vital fact. If they were not interested he could have no further value to them. Since he came from the enemy he was the enemy. Therefore, he would be killed. Because this was vital to his existence Brion took the time to follow the thought through. It made logical sense—and logic was all he could depend on now. He could be talking to robots or alien creatures for the amount of human response he was receiving.

"You can't win this war—all you can do is hurry your own deaths." He said this with as much conviction as he could, realizing at the same time that it was wasted effort. No flicker of response stirred in the men before him. "The Nyjorders know you have cobalt bombs, and they have detected your jump-space projector. They can't take any more chances. They have pushed the deadline closer by an entire day. There are one and a half days left before the bombs fall and you are all destroyed. Do you realize what that means—"

"Is that the message?" Lig-magte asked.

"Yes," Brion said.

* * * *

Two things saved his life then. He had guessed what would happen as soon as they had his message, though he hadn't been sure. But even the suspicion had put him on his guard. This, combined with the reflexes of a Winner of the Twenties, was barely enough to enable him to survive.

From frozen mobility Lig-magte had catapulted into headlong attack. As he leaped forward he drew a curved, double-edged blade from under his robes. It plunged unerringly through the spot where Brion's body had been an instant before.

There had been no time to tense his muscles and jump, just space to relax them and fall to one side. His reasoning mind joined the battle as he hit the floor. Lig-magte plunged by him, turning and bringing the knife down at the same time. Brion's foot lashed out and caught the other man's leg, sending him sprawling.

They were both on their feet at the same instant, facing each other. Brion now had his hands clasped before him in the unarmed man's best defense against a knife, the two arms protecting the body, the two hands joined to beat aside the knife arm from whichever

direction it came. The Disan hunched low, flipped the knife quickly from hand to hand, then thrust it again at Brion's midriff.

Only by the merest fractional margin did Brion evade the attack for the second time. Lig-magte fought with complete violence. Every action was as intense as possible, deadly and thorough. There could be only one end to this unequal contest if Brion stayed on the defensive. The man with the knife had to win.

With the next charge Brion changed tactics. He leaped inside the thrust, clutching for the knife arm. A burning slice of pain cut across his arm, then his fingers clutched the tendoned wrist. Clamped down hard, grinding shut, compressing with the tightening intensity of a closing vise.

It was all he could do to simply hold on. There was no science in it, just his greater strength from exercise and existence on a heavier planet. All of this strength went to his clutching hand, because he held his own life in that hand, forcing away the knife that wanted to terminate it forever. Nothing else mattered. Neither the frightening force of the knees that thudded into his body nor the hooked fingers that reached for his eyes to tear them out. He protected his face as well as he could, while the nails tore furrows through his flesh and the cut on his arm bled freely. These were only minor things to be endured. His life depended on the grasp of the fingers of his right hand.

There was a sudden immobility as he succeeded in clutching Lig-magte's other arm. It was a good grip and he could hold the arm immobilized. They had reached stasis, standing knee to knee, their faces only a few inches apart. The muffling cloth had fallen from the Disan's face during the struggle and empty, frigid eyes stared into Brion's. No flicker of emotion crossed the harsh planes of the other man's face. A great puckered white scar covered one cheek and pulled up a corner of the mouth in a cheerless grimace. It was false, there was still no expression here. Even when the pain must be growing more intense.

Brion was winning—if no one broke the impasse. His greater weight and strength counted now. The Disan would have to drop the knife before his arm was dislocated at the shoulder. He didn't do it. With sudden horror Brion realized that he wasn't going to drop it—no matter what happened.

A dull, hideous snap jerked through the Disan's body and the arm hung limp and dead. No expression crossed the other man's face. The knife was still locked in the fingers of the paralyzed hand. With his other hand Lig-magte reached across and started to pry the blade loose, ready to continue the battle one-handed. Brion raised his foot and kicked the knife free, sending it spinning across the room.

Lig-magte made a fist of his good hand and crashed it into Brion's body. He was still fighting, as if nothing had changed. Brion backed slowly away from the man. "Stop it," he said. "You can't win now. It's impossible." He called to the other men who were watching the unequal battle with expressionless immobility. No one answered him.

With a terrible sinking sensation Brion then realized what would happen and what he had to do. Lig-magte was as heedless of his own life as he was of the life of his planet. He would press the attack no matter what damage was done to him. Brion had an insane vision of him breaking the man's other arm, fracturing both his legs, and the limbless broken creature still coming forward. Crawling, rolling, teeth bared since they were the only remaining weapon.

There was only one way to end it. Brion feinted and the Lig-magte's arm moved clear of his body. The engulfing cloth was thin and through it Brion could see the outlines of the Disan's abdomen and rib cage. The clear location of the great nerve ganglion.

It was the death blow of the kara-te. Brion had never used it on a man. In practice he had broken heavy boards, splintering them instantly with the short, precise stroke. The stiffened hand moving forward in a sudden surge, all the weight and energy of his body concentrated in his joined fingertips. Plunging deep into the other's flesh.

Killing, not by accident or in sudden anger. Killing because this was the only way the battle could possibly end.

Like a ruined tower of flesh the Disan crumpled and fell.

Dripping blood, exhausted, Brion stood over the body of Lig-magte and stared at the dead man's allies.

Death filled the room.

CHAPTER XI

Facing the silent Disans, Brion's thoughts hurtled about in sweeping circles. There would be no more than an instant's tick of time before the magter avenged themselves bloodily and completely. He felt a fleeting regret for not having brought his gun, then abandoned the thought. There was no time for regrets—what could he do NOW.

The silent watchers hadn't attacked instantly, and Brion realized that they couldn't be positive yet that Lig-magte had been killed. Only Brion knew the deadliness of that blow. Their lack of knowledge might buy him a little more time.

"Lig-magte is unconscious, but will revive quickly," Brion said, pointing at the huddled body. As the eyes turned automatically to follow his finger, he began walking slowly towards the exit. "I did not

want to do this, but he forced me to, because he wouldn't listen to reason. Now I have something else to show you, something that I hoped it would not be necessary to reveal."

He was saying the first words that came into his head, trying to keep them distracted as long as possible. He must only appear to be going across the room, that was the feeling he must generate. There was even time to stop for a second and straighten his rumpled clothing and brush the sweat from his eyes. Talking easily, walking slowly towards the hall out of the chamber. He was halfway there when the spell broke and the rush began. One of the magter knelt and touched the body, and shouted a single word.

"Dead."

Brion hadn't waited for the official announcement. At the first movement of feet he dived headlong for the shelter of the exit. There was a spatter of tiny missiles on the wall next to him and he had a brief glimpse of raised blowguns before the wall intervened. He went up the dimly-lit stairs five at a time.

The pack was just behind him, voiceless and deadly. He could not gain on them—if anything they closed the distance as he pushed his already tired body to the utmost. There was no subtlety or trick he could use now, just straightforward flight back the way he had come. A single slip on the irregular steps and it would be all over.

There was someone ahead of him. If the woman had waited a few seconds more, he would certainly have been killed. But instead of slashing at him as he went by the doorway she made the mistake of rushing to the center of the stairs, the knife ready to impale him as he came up. Without slowing Brion fell onto his hands and easily dodged under the blow. As he passed he twisted and seized her around the waist, picking her from the ground.

When her legs lifted from under her the woman screamed—the first human sound Brion had heard in this human anthill. His pursuers were just behind him, and he hurled the woman into them with all his strength. They fell in a tangle and Brion used the precious seconds gained to reach the top of the building.

* * * *

There must have been other stairs and exits because one of the magter stood between Brion and the way down out of this trap. Armed and ready to kill him if he tried to pass.

As he ran towards the executioner, Brion flicked on his collar radio and shouted into it. "I'm in trouble here, can you—"

The guards in the car must have been waiting for this message.

Before he had finished there was the thud of a high-velocity slug hitting flesh and the Disan spun and fell, blood soaking his shoulder. Brion leaped over him and headed for the ramp.

"The next one is me—hold your fire!" he called.

Both guards must have had their telescopic sights zeroed on the spot. They let Brion pass, then threw in a hail of semiautomatic fire that tore chunks from the stone and screamed away in noisy ricochets. Brion didn't try to see if anyone was braving this hail of covering fire; he concentrated his energies on making as quick and erratic a descent as he could. Above the sounds of the firing he heard the car motor howl as it leaped forward. With their careful aim spoiled, the gunners switched to full automatic and unleashed a hailstorm of flying metal that bracketed the top of the tower.

"Cease…firing!" Brion gasped into the radio as he ran. The driver was good and timed his arrival with exactitude. The car reached the base of the tower at the same instant Brion did, and he burst through the door while it was still moving. No orders were necessary. He fell headlong onto a seat as the car swung in a dust-raising turn and ground into high gear back to the city.

Reaching over carefully, the tall guard gently extracted a bit of pointed wood and fluff from a fold of Brion's pants. He cracked open the car door, and just as delicately threw it out.

"I knew that thing didn't touch you," he said, "since you are still among the living. They got a poison on those blowgun darts that takes all of twelve seconds to work. Lucky."

Lucky! Brion was beginning to realize just how lucky he was to be out of the trap alive. With information. Now that he knew more about the magter he shuddered at his innocence in walking alone and unarmed into the tower. Skill had helped him survive—but better than average luck had been necessary. Curiosity had gotten him in, brashness and speed had taken him out. He was exhausted, battered and bloody—but cheerfully happy. The facts about the magter were shaping themselves into a theory that might explain their attempt at racial suicide. It just needed a little time to be put into shape.

A pain cut across his arm and he jumped, startled, pieces of his thoughts crashing into ruin around him. The gunner had cracked the first aid box and was swabbing his arm with antiseptic. The knife wound was long, but not deep. Brion shivered while the bandage was going on, then quickly slipped into his coat. The air conditioner whined industriously, bringing down the temperature.

There was no attempt to follow the car. When the black tower had dropped over the horizon the guards relaxed, ran cleaning rods through their guns and compared marksmanship. All of their antagonism towards Brion was gone—they actually smiled at him. He

had given them the first chance to shoot back since they had been on this planet.

The ride was uneventful and Brion was scarcely aware of it. A theory was taking form in his mind. It was radical, unusual and startling—yet it seemed to be the only one that fitted the facts. He pushed at it from all sides, but if there were any holes he couldn't find them. What it needed was dispassionate proving or disproving. There was only one person on Dis who was qualified to do this.

* * * *

Lea was working in the lab when he came in, bent over a low-power binocular microscope. Something small, limbless and throbbing was on the slide. She glanced up when she heard his footsteps, smiling warmly when she recognized him. Fatigue and pain had drawn her face, her skin glistening with burn ointment, was chapped and peeling. "I must look a wreck," she said, putting the back of her hand to her cheek. "Something like a well-oiled and lightly cooked piece of beef." She lowered her arm suddenly and took his hand in both of hers. Her palms were warm and slightly moist.

"Thank you, Brion," was all she could say. Her society on Earth was highly civilized and sophisticated, able to discuss any topic without emotion and without embarrassment. This was fine in most circumstances, but made it difficult to thank a person for saving your life. However you tried to phrase it, it came out sounding like a last act speech from an historical play. There was no doubt, however, as to what she meant. Her eyes were large and dark, the pupils dilated by the drugs she had been given. They could not lie, nor could the emotions he sensed. He did not answer, just held her hand an instant longer.

"How do you feel?" he asked, concerned. His conscience twinged as he remembered that he was the one who had ordered her out of bed and back to work today.

"I should be feeling terrible," she said, with an airy wave of her hand. "But I'm walking on top of the world. I'm so loaded with pain-killers and stimulants that I'm high as the moon. All the nerves to my feet feel turned off—it's like walking on two balls of fluff. Thanks for getting me out of that awful hospital and back to work."

Brion was suddenly ashamed of having driven her from her sick bed. "Don't be sorry!" Lea said, apparently reading his mind, but really seeing only his sudden drooped expression. "I'm feeling no pain. Honestly, I feel a little light-headed and foggy at times, nothing more. And this is the job I came here to do. In fact…well, it's almost

impossible to tell you just how fascinating it all is! It was almost worth getting baked and parboiled for."

She swung back to the microscope, centering the specimen with a turn of the stage adjustment screw. "Poor Ihjel was right when he said this planet was exobiologically fascinating. This is a gastropod, a lot like *Odostomia*, but it has parasitical morphological changes so profound—"

"There's something else I remember," Brion said, interrupting her enthusiastic lecture, only half of which he could understand. "Didn't Ihjel also hope that you would give some study to the natives as well as their environment. The problem is with the Disans—not the local wild life."

"But I am studying them," Lea insisted. "The Disans have attained an incredibly advanced form of commensalism. Their lives are so intimately connected and integrated with the other life forms that they must be studied in relation to their environment. I doubt if they show as many external physical changes as little eating-foot *Odostomia* on the slide here, but there will be surely a number of psychological changes and adjustments that will crop up. One of these might be the explanation of their urge for planetary suicide."

"That may be true—but I don't think so," Brion said. "I went on a little expedition this morning and found something that has more immediate relevancy."

For the first time Lea became aware of his slightly battered condition. Her drug-grooved mind could only follow a single idea at a time and had overlooked the significance of the bandage and dirt.

"I've been visiting," Brion said, forestalling the question on her lips. "The magter are the ones who are responsible for causing the trouble, and I had to see them up close before I could make any decision. It wasn't a very pleasant thing, but I found out what I wanted to know. They are different in every way from the normal Disans. I've compared them. I've talked to Ulv—the native who saved us in the desert—and I can understand him. He is not like us in many ways—he would certainly have to be, living in this oven—but he is still undeniably human. He gave us drinking water when we needed it, then brought help. The magter, the upper-class lords of Dis, are the direct opposite. As cold-blooded and ruthless a bunch of murderers as you can possibly imagine. They tried to kill me when they met me, without reason. Their clothes, habits, dwellings, manners—everything about them differs from that of the normal Disan. More important, the magter are as coldly efficient and inhuman as a reptile. They have no emotions, no love, no hate, anger, fear—nothing. Each of them is a chilling bundle of thought processes and reactions, with all the emotions removed."

“Aren’t you exaggerating?” Lea asked. “After all, you can’t be sure. It might just be part of their training not to reveal any emotional state. Everyone must experience emotional states whether they like it or not.”

“That’s my main point. Everyone does—except the magter. I can’t go into all the details now, so you’ll just have to take my word for it. Even at the point of death they have no fear or hatred. It may sound impossible, but it is true.”

* * * *

Lea tried to shake the knots from her drug-hazed mind. “I’m dull today,” she said, “you’ll have to excuse me. If these rulers had no emotional responses, that might explain their present suicidal position. But an explanation like this raises more new problems than it supplies answers to the old ones. How did they get this way? It doesn’t seem humanly possible to be without emotions.”

“Just my point. Not *humanly* possible. I think these ruling class Disans aren’t human at all, like the other Disans. I think they are alien creatures—robots or androids—anything except men. I think they are living in disguise among the normal human dwellers.”

First Lea started to smile, then she changed her mind when she saw his face. “You are serious?” she asked.

“Never more so. I realize it must sound as if I’ve had my brains bounced around too much this morning. Yet this is the only idea I can come up with that fits all of the facts. Look at the evidence yourself. One simple thing stands out clearly, and must be considered first if any theory is to hold up. That is the magters’ complete indifference to death—their own or anyone else’s. Is that normal to mankind?”

“No—but I can find a couple of explanations that I would rather explore first, before dragging in an alien life form. There may have been a mutation or an inherited disease that had deformed or warped their minds.”

“Wouldn’t that be sort of self-eliminating?” Brion asked. “Antisurvival? People who die before puberty would find it a little difficult to pass on a mutation to their children. But let’s not beat this one point to death—it’s the totality of these people that I find so hard to accept. Any one thing might be explained away, but not the collection of them. What about their complete lack of emotion? Or their manner of dress and their secrecy in general? The ordinary Disan wears a cloth kilt, while the magter cover themselves as completely as possible. They stay in their black towers and never go out except in groups. Their dead are always removed so they can’t be examined. In

every way they act like a race apart—and I think they are."

"Granted for the moment that this outlandish idea might be true, how did they get here? And why doesn't anyone know about it besides them?"

"Easily enough explained," Brion insisted. "There are no written records on this planet. After the breakdown, when the handful of survivors were just trying to exist here, the aliens could have landed and moved in. Any interference could have been wiped out. Once the population began to grow the invaders found they could keep control by staying separate, so their alien difference wouldn't be noticed."

"Why should that bother them?" Lea asked. "If they are so indifferent to death, they can't have any strong thoughts on public opinion or alien body odor. Why would they bother with such a complex camouflage? And if they arrived from another planet what has happened to the scientific ability that brought them here?"

"Peace," Brion said. "I don't know enough to even be able to guess at answers to half those questions. I'm just trying to fit a theory to the facts. And the facts are clear. The magter are so inhuman they would give me nightmares—if I were sleeping these days. What we need is more evidence."

"Then get it," Lea said with finality. "I'm not telling you to turn murderer—but you might try a bit of grave-digging. Give me a scalpel and one of your fiends stretched out on a slab and I'll quickly tell you what he is or is not." She turned back to the microscope and bent over the eyepiece.

That was really the only way to hack the Gordion knot. Dis had only thirty-six more hours to live, so individual deaths shouldn't be of any concern. He had to find a dead magter, and if none were obtainable in the proper condition he had to violently get one of them that way. For a planetary savior he was personally doing in an awful lot of the citizenry. He stood behind Lea, looking down at her thoughtfully while she worked. The back of her neck was turned up to him, lightly covered with gently curling hair. With one of the about-face shifts the mind is capable of his thoughts flipped from death to life, and he experienced a strong desire to lightly caress this spot, to feel the yielding texture of female flesh….

Plunging his hands deep into his pockets he walked quickly to the door. "Get some rest soon," he called to her. "I doubt if those bugs will give you the answer. I'm going now to see if I can get the full-sized specimen you want."

"The truth could be anywhere, I'll stay on these until you come back," she said, not looking up from the microscope.

* * * *

Up under the roof was a well-equipped communications room, Brion had taken a quick look at it when he had first toured the building. The duty operator had earphones on—though only one of the phones covered an ear—and was monitoring through the bands. His shoeless feet were on the edge of the table and he was eating a thick sandwich with his free hand. His eyes bugged when he saw Brion in the doorway and he jumped into a flurry of action.

"Hold the pose," Brion told him, "it doesn't bother me. And if you make any sudden moves you are liable to break a phone, electrocute yourself or choke to death. Just see if you can set the transceiver on this frequency for me." Brion wrote the number on a scratchpad and slid it over to the operator. It was the frequency Professor-commander Krafft had given him for the radio of the illegal terrorists—the Nyjord army.

The operator plugged in a handset and gave it to Brion. "Circuit open," he mumbled around a mouthful of still unswallowed sandwich.

"This is Brandd, director of the C.R.F. Come in please." He went on repeating this for more than ten minutes before he got an answer.

"What do you want?"

"I have a message of vital urgency for you—and I would also like your help. Do you want any more information on the radio?"

"No. Wait there—we'll get in touch with you after dark." The carrier wave went dead.

Thirty-five hours to the end of the world—and all he could do was wait.

CHAPTER XII

On Brion's desk when he came in, were two neat piles of paper. As he sat down and reached for them he was conscious of an arctic coldness in the air, a frigid blast. It was coming from the air-conditioner grille which was now covered by welded steel bars. The control unit was sealed shut. Someone was either being very funny or very efficient. Either way it was cold. Brion kicked at the cover plate until it buckled, then bent it aside. After a careful look into the interior he disconnected one wire and shorted it to another. He was rewarded by a number of sputtering cracks and a good quantity of smoke. The compressor moaned and expired.

Faussel was standing in the door with more papers and a shocked expression. "What do you have there?" Brion asked. Faussel managed to straighten out his face and brought the folders to the desk, arranging them on the piles already there.

"These are the progress reports you asked for, from all units. Details to date, conclusions, suggestions, et cetera."

"And the other pile?" Brion pointed.

"Offplanet correspondence, commissary invoices, requisitions," he straightened the edges of the stack while he answered. "Daily report, hospital log—" His voice died away and stopped as Brion carefully pushed the stack off the edge of the desk into the wastebasket.

"In other words, red tape," Brion said. "Well it's all filed."

One by one the progress reports followed the first stack into the basket, until his desk was clear. Nothing. It was just what he had expected. But there had always been the off-chance that one of the specialists could come up with a new approach. They hadn't, they were all too busy specializing.

Outside the sky was darkening. The front entrance guard had been told to let in anyone who came asking for the director. There was nothing else Brion could do until the Nyjord rebels made contact. Irritation bit at him. At least Lea was doing something constructive, he could look in on her.

He opened the door to the lab with a feeling of pleasant anticipation. It froze and shattered instantly. Her microscope was hooded and she was gone. *She's having dinner*, he thought, *or—she's in the hospital*. The hospital was on the floor below and he went there first.

"Of course she's here!" Dr. Stine grumbled. "Where else should a girl in her condition be? She was out of bed long enough today. Tomorrow's the last day, and if you want to get any more work out of her before the deadline, you have better let her rest tonight. Better let the whole staff rest. I've been handing out tranquilizers like aspirin all day. They're falling apart."

"The world's falling apart. How is Lea doing?"

"Considering her shape she's fine. Go in and see for yourself if you won't take my word for it. I have other patients to look at."

"Are you that worried, doctor?"

"Of course I am! I'm just as prone to the ills of the flesh as the rest of you. We're sitting on a ticking bomb and I don't like it. I'll do my job as long as it is necessary, but I'll also be glad to see the ships land to pull us out. The only skin that I really feel emotionally concerned about right now is my own. And if you want to be let in on a public secret—the rest of your staff feels the same way. So don't look forward to too much efficiency."

"I never did," Brion said.

* * * *

Lea's room was dark, illuminated only by the light of Dis' moon

slanting in the window. Brion let himself in and closed the door behind him. Walking quietly he went over to the bed. She was sleeping soundly, her breathing gentle and regular. A night's sleep now would do as much good as all the medication.

He should have gone then, instead he sat down in the chair placed next to the head of the bed. The guards knew where he was, he could wait here just as well as any place else.

It was a stolen moment of peace on a world at the brink of destruction. He was grateful for it. Everything looked less harsh in the moonlight and he rubbed some of the tension from his eyes. Lea's face was ironed smooth by the light, beautiful and young; a direct contrast to everything else on this poisonous world. Her hand was outside of the covers and he took it in his own, obeying a sudden impulse. Looking out of the window at the desert in the distance, he let the peace wash over him, forcing himself to forget for the moment that in one more day life would be stripped from this planet.

Later, when he looked back at Lea he saw that her eyes were open, though she hadn't moved. How long had she been awake? He jerked his hand away from hers, feeling suddenly guilty.

"Is the boss-man looking after the serfs, to see if they're fit for the treadmill in the morning?" she asked. It was the kind of remark she had used with such frequency in the ship, though it didn't sound quite as harsh now. And she was smiling. Yet it reminded him too well of her superior attitude towards the rubes from the stellar sticks. Here he might be the director, but on ancient Earth he would be only one more gaping yokel.

"How do you feel?" he asked, realizing and hating the triteness of the words, even as he said them.

"Terrible. I'll be dead by morning. Reach me a piece of fruit from that bowl, will you? My mouth tastes like an old boot heel. Wonder how fresh fruit ever got here? Probably a gift to the working classes from the smiling planetary murderers on Nyjord," she took the apple Brion gave her and bit into it. "Did you ever think of going to Earth?"

Brion was startled, this was too close to his own thoughts about planetary backgrounds. There couldn't possibly be a connection though. "Never," he told her. "Up until a few months ago I never even considered leaving Anvhar. The Twenties are such a big thing at home that it is hard to imagine that anything else exists while you are still taking part in them."

"Spare me the Twenties," she pleaded. "After listening to you and Ihjel I know far more about them than I shall ever care to know. But what about Anvhar itself? Do you have big city-states like Earth?"

"Nothing like that. For its size it has a very small population. No big cities at all. I guess the largest centers of population are around

the schools, packing plants, things like that."

"Any exobiologists there?" Lea asked, with a woman's eternal ability to make any general topic personal.

"At the universities, I suppose, though I wouldn't know for sure. And you must realize that when I say no big cities, I also mean no little cities. We aren't organized that way at all. I imagine the basic physical unit is family and the circle of friends. Friends get important quickly since the family breaks up when children are still relatively young. Something in the genes I suppose, we all enjoy being alone. Suppose you might call it an inbred survival trait."

"Up to a point," she said, biting delicately into the apple. "Carry that sort of thing too far and you end up with no population at all. A certain amount of proximity is necessary for that."

"Of course there is. And there must be some form of recognized relationship or control—that or complete promiscuity. On Anvhar the emphasis is on personal responsibility, and that seems to take care of the problem. If we didn't have an adult way of looking at…things, our kind of life would be impossible. Individuals are brought together either by accident or design, and with this proximity must be some certainty of relations—"

"You're losing me," Lea protested. "Either I'm still foggy from the dope or you are suddenly unable to speak a word of less than four syllables in length. You know—whenever this happens with you I get the distinct impression that you are trying to cover up something. For Occam's sake be specific! Bring together two of these hypothetical individuals and tell me what happens."

* * * *

Brion took a deep breath. He was in over his head and far from shore. "Well—take a bachelor like myself. Since I like cross-country skiing I make my home in this big house our family has, right at the edge of the Broken Hills. In summer I looked after a drumtum herd, but after slaughtering my time was my own all winter. I did a lot of skiing, and used to work for the Twenties. Sometimes I would go visiting. Then again, people would drop in on me—houses are few and far between on Anvhar. We don't even have locks on our front doors. You accept and give hospitality without qualification. Whoever comes. Male—female—in groups or just traveling alone—"

"I get the drift. Life must be dull for a single girl on your iceberg planet, she must surely have to stay home a lot."

"Only if she wants to. Otherwise she can go wherever she wishes and be welcomed as another individual. I suppose it is out of fashion

in the rest of the galaxy—and would probably raise a big laugh on Earth—but a platonic, disinterested friendship between man and woman is an accepted thing on Anvhar."

"Sounds exceedingly dull. If you are all such cool and distant friends, what keeps your birthrate going?"

Brion felt his ears flushing, not quite sure if he was being teased or not. "There are plenty of happy marriages. But it is up to the woman always to indicate if she is interested in a man. A girl who isn't interested won't get any proposals. I imagine this is a lot different from other planets—but so is our world. The system works well enough for us."

"Just about the opposite of Earth," Lea told him, dropping the apple core into a dish and carefully licking the tips of her fingers. "I guess you Anvharians would describe Earth as a planetary hotbed of sin. The reverse of your system, and going full blast all the time. There are far too many people there for comfort. Birth control came late and is still being fought—if you can possibly imagine that. There are just too many crack-brained ideas that have been long entrenched in custom. The world's overcrowded. Men, women, children, a boiling mob wherever you look. And all of the physically mature ones seem to be involved in the Great Game of Love. The male is always the aggressor, and women take the most outrageous kinds of flattery for granted. At parties these are always a couple of hot breaths of passion fanning your neck. A girl has to keep her spike heels filed sharp."

"She has to *what*—?"

"A figure of speech, Brion. Meaning you fight back all the time, if you don't want to be washed under by the flood."

"Sounds rather"—Brion weighed the word before he said it, but could find none other suitable—"repellent."

"From your point of view, it would be. I'm afraid we get so used to it that we even take it for granted. Sociologically speaking—" She stopped and looked at Brion's straight back and almost rigid posture. Her eyes widened and her mouth opened in an unspoken *oh* of sudden realization.

"I'm being a fool," she said. "You weren't speaking generally at all! You had a very specific subject in mind. Namely *me*!"

"Please, Lea, you must understand—"

"But I do!" she laughed. "All the time I thought you were being a frigid and hard-hearted lump of ice, you were really being very sweet. Just playing the game in good old Anvharian style. Waiting for a sign from me. We'd still be playing by different rules if you hadn't had more sense than I, and finally realized that somewhere along the line we must have got our signals mixed. And I thought you were some kind of frosty offworld celibate." She let her hand go out and her

fingers rustled through his hair. Something she had been wanting to do for a long time.

"I had to," he said, trying to ignore the light touch of her fingers. "Because I thought so much of you, I couldn't have done anything to insult you. Until I began to worry where the insult would lie, since I knew nothing about your planet's mores."

"Well you know now," she said very softly. "The men aggress. Now that I understand, I think I like your way better. But I'm still not sure of all the rules. Do I explain that yes, Brion, I like you so very much? You are more man, in one great big wide shouldered lump, than I have ever met before—"

His arms were around her, holding her to him, and their lips sought each other's in the darkness.

PART 4

CHAPTER XIII

"He wouldn't come in, sir. Just hammered on the door and said, *I'm here, tell Brandd.*"

"Good enough," Brion said, seating his gun in the holster and sliding the extra clips into his pocket. "I'm going out now, and I should return before dawn. Get one of the wheeled stretchers down here from the hospital. I'll want it waiting when I get back."

Outside the street was darker than he remembered. Brion frowned and his hand moved towards his gun. Someone had put all the nearby lights out of commission. There was just enough illumination from the stars to enable him to make out the dark bulk of a sandcar.

The motor roared as soon as he had closed the door. Without lights the sandcar churned a path through the city and out into the desert. Though the speed picked up, the driver still drove in the dark, feeling his way with a light touch on the controls. The ground rose, and when they reached the top of a flat mesa he killed the engine. Neither the driver nor Brion had spoken a word since they left.

A switch snapped and the instrument lights came on. In their dim glow Brion could just make out the other man's hawklike profile. When he moved Brion saw that his figure was cruelly shortened. Either accident or a mutated gene had warped his spine, hunching him forward in eternally bent supplication. Warped bodies are rare—his was the first Brion had ever seen. He wondered what series of events had kept him from medical attention all his life. This might explain the bitterness and pain in the man's voice.

"Did the mighty brains on Nyjord bother to tell you that they have chopped another day off the deadline? That this world is about to come to an end?"

"Yes, I know," Brion said. "That's why I'm asking your group for help. Our time is running out too fast."

The man didn't answer, merely grunted and gave his full attention to the radar pings and glowing screen. The electronic senses reached out as he made a check on all the search frequencies to see if they were being followed.

"Where are we going?" Brion asked.

"Out into the desert," the driver made a vague wave of his hand. "Headquarters of the army. Since the whole thing will be blown up in another day, I guess I can tell you it's the only camp we have. All the cars, men and weapons are based there. And Hys. He's the man in

charge. Tomorrow it will be all gone—along with this cursed planet. What's your business with us?"

"Shouldn't I be telling Hys that?"

"Suit yourself." Satisfied with the instrument search the driver kicked the car to life again and churned on across the desert. "But we're a volunteer army and we have no secrets from each other. Just from the fools at home who are going to kill this world." There was a bitterness in his words that he made no attempt to conceal. "They fought among themselves and put off a firm decision so long that now they are forced to commit murder."

"From what I had heard, I thought that it was the other way around. They call your Nyjord Army terrorists."

"We are. Because we are an army and we're at war. The idealists at home only understood that when it was too late. If they had backed us in the beginning, we would have blown open every black castle on Dis—searched until we found those bombs. But that would have meant wanton destruction and death. They wouldn't consider that. Now they are going to kill everyone, destroy everything." He flicked on the panel lights just long enough to take a compass bearing, and Brion saw the tortured unhappiness in his twisted body.

"It's not over yet," Brion said. "There is more than a day left, and I think I'm onto something that might stop the war—without any bombs being dropped."

"You're in charge of the Cultural Relationships Free Bread and Blankets Foundation, aren't you? What good can your bunch do when the shooting starts?"

"None. But maybe we can put off the shooting. If you are trying to insult me—don't bother. My irritation quotient is very high."

The driver just grunted at this, slowing down as they ran through a field of broken rock. "What is it you want?" he asked.

"We want to make a detailed examination of one of the magter. Alive or dead, it doesn't make any difference. You wouldn't happen to have one around?"

"No. We've fought with them often enough, but always on their home grounds. They keep all their casualties, and a good number of ours. What good will it do you anyway? A dead one won't tell you where the bombs or the jump-space projector is."

"I don't see why I should explain that to you—unless you are in charge. You are Hys, aren't you?"

* * * *

The driver grunted angrily and was silent while he drove. Finally

he asked, “What makes you think that?”

“Call it a hunch. You don’t act very much like a sandcar driver for one thing. Of course your army may be all generals and no privates—but I doubt it. I also know that time has almost run out for all of us. This is a long ride and it would be a complete waste of time if you just sat out in the desert and waited for me. By driving me yourself you could make your mind up before we arrived. Have a decision ready whether you are going to help me or not. Are you?”

“Yes—I’m Hys. But you still haven’t answered my question. What do you want the body for?”

“We’re going to cut it open and take a good long look. I don’t think the magter are human. They are something living among men and disguised as men—but still not human.”

“Secret aliens?” Hys exploded the words in a mixture of surprise and disgust.

“Perhaps. The examination will tell us that.”

“You’re either stupid or incompetent,” Hys said bitterly. “The heat of Dis has cooked your brains in your head. I’ll be no part of this kind of absurd plan.”

“You must,” Brion said, surprised at his own calmness. He could sense the other man’s interest hidden behind his insulting manner. “I don’t even have to give you my reasons. In another day this world ends and you have no way to stop it. I just might have an idea that could work and you can’t afford to take any chances—not if you are really sincere. Either you are a murderer, killing Disans for pleasure, or you honestly want to stop the war. Which is it?”

“You’ll have your body all right,” Hys grated, hurling the car viciously around a spire of rock. “Not that it will accomplish anything—but I can find no fault in killing another magter. We can fit your operation into our plans without any trouble. This is the last night and I have sent every one of my teams out on raids. We’re breaking into as many magter towers as possible before dawn. There is a slim chance that we might uncover something. It’s really just shooting in the dark, but it’s all we can do now. My own team is waiting and you can ride along with us. The others left earlier. We’re going to hit a small tower on this side of the city. We raided it once before and captured a lot of small arms that they had stored there. There is a good chance that they may have been stupid enough to store something there again. Sometimes the magter seem to suffer from a complete lack of imagination.”

“You have no idea just how right you are,” Brion told him.

The sandcar slowed down now, as they approached a slab-sided mesa that rose vertically from the desert. They crunched across broken rocks, leaving no tracks. A light blinked on the dashboard and Hys

stopped instantly and killed the engine. They climbed out, stretching and shivering in the cold desert night.

It was dark walking in the shadow of the cliff and they had to feel their way along a path through the tumbled boulders. A sudden blaze of light made Brion wince and shield his eyes. Near him, on the ground, was the humming shape of a cancellation projector, sending out a fan-shaped curtain of vibration that absorbed all the light rays falling upon it. This incredible blackness made a lightproof wall for the recessed hollow at the foot of the cliff. In this shelter, under the overhang of rock, were three open sandcars. They were large and armor-plated, warlike in their scarred gray paint. Men sprawled, talked and polished their weapons. Everything stopped when Hys and Brion appeared.

"Load up," Hys called out. "We're going to attack now, same plan I outlined earlier. Get Telt over here." Talking to his own men some of the harshness was gone from his voice. The tall soldiers of Nyjord moved in ready obedience to the commander. They loomed over his bent figure, most of them twice as tall as him. Yet there was no hesitation in jumping when he commanded. They were the body of the Nyjord striking force—he was the brains.

A square-cut, compact man rolled up to Hys and saluted with a leisurely flick of his hand. He was weighted and slung about with packs and electronic instruments. His pockets bulged with small tools.

"This is Telt," Hys said to Brion, "he'll take care of you. Telt's my personal technical squad. Goes along on all my operations with his meters to test the interiors of the Disan forts. So far he's found no trace of a jump-space generator, or excess radioactivity that might indicate a bomb. Since he's useless and you're useless, you can both take care of each other. Use the car we came in."

Telt's wide face split in a frog-like grin, his voice was hoarse and throaty. "Wait! Just wait! Some day those needles gonna flicker and all our troubles be over. What you want me to do with the stranger?"

"Supply him with a corpse—one of the magter," Hys said. "Take it where he wants and then report back here." Hys scowled at Telt. "Some day your needles will flicker! Poor fool—this is the last day." He turned away and waved the men into their sandcars.

"He likes me," Telt said, attaching a final piece of equipment. "You can tell because he calls me names like that. He's a great man, Hys is, but they never found out until it was too late. Hand me that meter, will you?"

* * * *

Brion followed the technician out to the car and helped him load his equipment aboard. When the larger cars appeared out of the darkness, Telt swung around after them. They snaked forward in a single line through the rocks, until they came to the desert of rolling sand dunes. Then they spread out in line abreast and rushed towards their goal.

Telt hummed to himself hoarsely as he drove. He broke off suddenly and looked at Brion. “What you want the dead Dis for?”

“A theory,” Brion answered sluggishly. He had been half napping in the chair, taking the opportunity for some rest before the attack. “I’m still looking for a way to avert the end.”

“You and Hys,” Telt said with satisfaction. “Couple of idealists. Trying to stop a war you didn’t start. They never would listen to Hys. He told them in the beginning exactly what would happen, and he was right. They always thought his ideas were crooked, like him. Growing up alone in the hill camp, with his back too twisted and too old to be fixed when he finally did come out. Ideas twisted the same way. Made himself an authority on war. Hah! War on Nyjord. That’s like being an icecube specialist in hell. But he knew all about it, but they never would let him use what he knew. Put granddaddy Krafft in charge instead.”

“But Hys is in charge of an army now?”

“All volunteers, too few of them and too little money. Too little and too damned late to do any good. I’ll never be good enough. And for this we get called butchers.” There was a catch in Telt’s voice now, an undercurrent of emotion he couldn’t suppress. “At home they think we like to kill. Think we’re insane. They can’t understand we’re doing the only thing that has to be done—” He broke off as he quickly locked on the brakes and killed the engine. The line of sandcars had come to a stop. Ahead, just visible over the dunes, was the summit of a dark tower.

“We walk from here,” Telt said, standing and stretching. “We can take our time because the other boys go in first, soften things up. Then you and I head for the sub-cellar for a radiation check and find you a handsome corpse.”

Walking at first, then crawling when the dunes no longer shielded them, they crept up on the Disan keep. Dark figures moved ahead of them, stopping only when they reached the crumbling black walls. They didn’t use the ascending ramp, but made their way up the sheer outside face of the ramparts.

“Linethrowers,” Telt whispered. “Anchor themselves when the missile hits, have some kind of quicksetting goo. Then we go up the filament with a line-climbing motor. Hys invented them.”

“Is that the way you and I are going in?” Brion asked.

“No, we get out of the climbing. I told you we hit this rock once before. I know the layout inside.” He was moving while he talked, carefully pacing the distance around the base of the tower. “Should be right about here.”

High-pitched keening sliced the air and the top of the magter building burst into flame. Automatic weapons hammered above them. Something fell silently through the night and hit heavily on the ground near them.

“Attack’s started,” Telt shouted. “We have to get through now, while all the creepies are fighting it out on top.” He pulled a plate-shaped object from one of his bags and slapped it hard against the wall. It hung there. He twisted the back of it, pulled something and waved Brion to the ground. “Shaped charge. Should blow straight in, but you never can tell.”

The ground jumped under them and the ringing thud was a giant fist punching through the wall. A cloud of dust and smoke rolled clear and they could see the dark opening in the rock, a tunnel driven into the wall by the directional force of the explosion. Telt shone a light through the hole at the crumbled chamber inside.

“Nothing to worry about from anybody who was leaning against this wall. But let’s get in and out of this black beehive before the ones upstairs come down to investigate.”

Shattered rock was thick on the floor, and they skidded and tumbled over it. Telt pointed the way with his light, down a sharply angled ramp. “Underground chambers in the rock. They always store their stuff down there—”

A smoking, black sphere arced out of the tunnel’s mouth, hitting at their feet. Telt just gaped, but even as it hit the floor Brion was jumping forward. He caught it with the side of his foot, kicking it back into the dark opening of the tunnel. Telt hit the ground next to him as the orange flame of an explosion burst below. Bits of shrapnel rattled from the ceiling and wall behind them.

“Grenades!” Telt gasped. “They only used them once before—can’t have many. Gotta warn Hys.” He plugged a throat mike into the transmitter on his back and spoke quickly into it. There was a stirring below and Brion poured a rain of fire into the tunnel.

“They’re catching it bad on top, too! We gotta pull out. Go first and I’ll cover you.”

“I came for my Disan—I’m not leaving until I get one.”

“You’re crazy! You’re dead if you stay!”

* * * *

Telt was scrambling back towards their crumbled entrance as he talked. His back was turned when Brion fired. The magter appeared silently as the shadow of death. They charged without a sound, running with expressionless faces into the bullets. Two died at once, curling and folding, the third one fell at Brion's feet. Shot, pierced, dying, but not yet dead. Leaving a crimson track it hunched closer, lifting its knife to Brion. He didn't move. How many times must you murder a man? Or was it a man. His mind and body rebelled against the killing and was almost ready to accept death himself, rather than kill again.

Telt's bullets tore through the body and it dropped with grim finality.

"There's your corpse—now get it out of here!" Telt screeched.

Between them they worked the sodden weight of the dead magter through the hole, their exposed backs crawling with the expectation of instant death. There were no more attacks as they ran from the tower, other than a grenade that exploded too far behind them to do any harm.

One of the armored sandcars circled the keep, headlights blazing, keeping up a steady fire from its heavy weapons. The attackers climbed into it as they beat a retreat. Telt and Brion dragged the Disan behind them, struggling through the loose sand toward the circling car. Telt glanced over his shoulder and broke into a shambling run.

"They're following us—!" he gasped. "The first time they ever chased us after a raid!"

"They must know we have the body," Brion said.

"Leave it behind—!" Telt choked. "Too heavy to carry…anyway!"

"I'd rather leave you," Brion snapped. "Let me have it." He pulled the corpse away from the unresisting Telt and heaved it across his shoulders. "Now use your gun to cover us!"

Telt threw a rain of slugs back towards the dark figures following them. The driver must have seen the flare of their fire, because the truck turned and started towards them. It braked in a choking cloud of dust and ready hands reached to pull them up. Brion pushed the body in ahead of himself and scrambled after it. The truck engine throbbed and they churned away into the blackness, away from the gutted tower.

"You know, that was more like kind of a joke, when I said I'd leave the corpse behind," Telt told Brion. "You didn't believe me, did you?"

"Yes," Brion said, holding the dead weight of the magter against the truck's side. "I thought you meant it."

"Ahhh—" Telt grumbled. "You're as bad as Hys. Take things too seriously."

Brion suddenly realized that he was wet with blood, his clothing sodden. His stomach rose at the thought and he clutched the edge of the sandcar. Killing like this was too personal. Talking abstractedly about a body was one thing. But murdering a man, then lifting his dead flesh and feeling his blood warm upon you is an entirely different matter. Yet the magter weren't human, he knew that. The thought was only mildly comforting.

* * * *

After they had reached the rest of the waiting sandcars, the raiding party split up. "Each one goes in a different direction," Telt said, "so they can't track us to the base." He clipped a piece of paper next to the compass and kicked the motor into life. "We'll make a big *U* in the desert and end up in Hovedstad, I got the course here. Then I'll dump you and your friend and beat it back to our camp. You're not still burned at me for what I said, are you? Are you?"

Brion didn't answer. He was staring fixedly out of the side window. "What's doing?" Telt asked. Brion pointed out at the rushing darkness.

"Over there," he said, pointing to the growing light on the horizon.

"Dawn," Telt said. "Lotta rain on your planet? Didn't you ever see the sun come up before?"

"Not on the last day of a world."

"Lock it up," Telt grumbled. "You give me the crawls. I know they're going to be blasted. But at least I know I did everything I could to stop it. How do you think they are going to be feeling at home—on Nyjord—from tomorrow on?"

"Maybe we can still stop it?" Brion said, shrugging off the feeling of gloom, Telt's only answer was a wordless sound of disgust.

By the time they had cut a large loop in the desert the sun was high in the sky, the daily heat begun. Their course took them through a chain of low, flinty hills that cut their speed almost to zero. They ground ahead in low gear while Telt sweated and cursed, struggling with the controls. Then they were on firm sand and picking up speed towards the city.

As soon as Brion saw Hovedstad clearly he felt a clutch of fear. From somewhere in the city a black plume of smoke was rising. It could have been one of the deserted buildings aflame, a minor blaze. Yet the closer they came, the greater the tension grew. Brion didn't dare put it into words himself, it was Telt who vocalized the thought.

"A fire or something. Coming from your area, somewhere close to

your building."

Within the city they saw the first signs of destruction. Broken rubble on the streets. The smell of greasy smoke in their nostrils. More and more people appeared, going in the same direction they were. The normally deserted streets of Hovedstad were now almost crowded. Disans, obvious by their bare shoulders, mixed with the few offworlders who still remained.

Brion made sure the tarpaulin was well wrapped around the body before they pushed slowly through the growing crowd.

"I don't like all this publicity," Telt complained, looking at the people. "It's the last day, or I'd be turning back. They know our cars, we've raided them often enough." Turning a corner he braked suddenly.

Ahead was destruction. Black, broken rubble had been churned into desolation. It was still smoking, pink tongues of flame licking over the ruins. A fragment of wall fell with a rumbling crash.

"It's your building—the Foundation building!" Telt shouted. "They've been here ahead of us, must have used the radio to call a raid. They did a job, explosive of some kind."

Hope was dead. Dis was dead. In the ruin ahead, mixed and broken with the other rubble, were the bodies of all the people who had trusted him. Lea. Beautiful and cruelly dead Lea. Dr. Stine, his patients, Faussel, all of them. He had kept them on this planet and now they were dead. Every one of them. Dead.

Murderer!

CHAPTER XIV

Life was ended. Brion's mind contained nothing but despair and the pain of irretrievable loss. If his brain had been complete master of his body he would have died there, for at that moment there was no will to live. Unaware of this his heart continued to beat and the regular motion of his lungs drew in the dreadful sweetness of the smoke-tainted air. With automatic directness his body lived on.

"What you gonna do?" Telt asked, even his natural exuberation stilled by this. Brion only shook his head as the words penetrated. What could he do? What could possibly be done?

"Follow me," a voice said in guttural Disan through the opening of a rear window. The speaker was lost in the crowd before they could turn. Aware now, Brion saw a native move away from the edge of the crowd and turn in their direction. It was Ulv.

"Turn the car—that way!" He punched Telt's arm and pointed. "Do it slowly and don't draw any attention to us." There was sudden hope, which he kept himself from considering. The building was gone

and the people in it all dead. That fact had to be faced.

"What's going on?" Telt asked. "Who was that talked in the window?"

"A native—that one up ahead. He saved my life in the desert, and I think he is on our side. Even though he's a native Disan, he can understand facts that the magter can't. He knows what will happen to this planet." Brion was talking, filling his brain with words so he wouldn't begin to have hope.

Ulv moved slowly and naturally through the streets, never looking back. They followed, as far behind as they dared, yet still keeping him in sight. There were fewer people about here among the deserted offworld storehouses. Ulv vanished into one, LIGHT METALS TRUST LTD. the sign read above the door. Telt slowed the car.

"Don't stop here," Brion said. "Drive on around the corner, and pull up."

Brion climbed out of the car with an ease he did not feel. There was no one in sight now, in either direction. Walking slowly back to the corner he checked the street they had just left—hot, silent and empty!

A sudden blackness appeared where the door of the warehouse had been, and the sudden flickering motion of a hand. Brion signaled Telt to start, and jumped into the already moving sandcar.

"Into that open door—quickly before anyone sees us!" The car rumbled down a ramp into the dark interior and the door slid shut behind them.

"Ulv. What is it? Where are you?" Brion called, blinking in the murky interior. A gray form appeared next to him.

"I am here."

"Did you—" There was no way to finish the sentence.

"I heard of the raid. The magter called together all of us they could to help them carry explosives. I went along. I could not stop them and there was no time to warn anyone in the building."

"Then they are all dead—?"

"Yes," Ulv nodded, "all except one. I knew I could possibly save one, and I was not sure who. So I took the woman you were with in the desert, she is here now. She was hurt, but not badly, when I brought her out."

Guilty relief flooded through Brion. He shouldn't exult, not with the death of everyone in the Foundation still fresh in his mind. But at that instant he was happy.

"May I see her?" he asked Ulv. He was seized by the sudden fear that there might be a mistake. Perhaps Ulv had saved a different girl.

* * * *

Ulv led the way across the empty loading bay. Brion followed closely, fighting down the temptation to tell him to hurry. When he saw that Ulv was heading towards an office in the far wall, he could control himself no longer and ran on ahead.

It was Lea, lying unconscious on a couch. Sweat beaded her face and she moaned and stirred without opening her eyes.

"I gave her *sover*, then wrapped her in cloth so no one would know," Ulv said.

Telt was close behind them looking in through the open door.

"*Sover* is a drug they take from one of their plants," he said. "We got a lot of experience with it. A little makes a good knock-out drug, but it's deadly poison in large doses. I got the antidote in the car, wait and I'll get it." He went out.

Brion sat next to Lea and wiped her face clean of dirt and perspiration. The dark shadows under her eyes were almost black now and her elfin face even thinner. Yet she was alive, that was the important thing. Some of the tension drained away and he could think again. There was still the job to do. After this last experience she should be in a hospital bed. Yet this was impossible. He had to drag her to her feet and put her back to work. The answer might still be found. Each second ticked away another fraction of the planet's life.

"Good as new in a minute," Telt said, banging down the heavy medbox. He watched intently as Ulv left the room. "Hys should know about this renegade. Might be useful as a spy or for information. Of course it's too late now to do anything, so the hell with it." He pulled a pistol-shaped hypodermic gun from the box and dialed a number on the side. "Now, if you'll roll her sleeve up I'll bring her back to life." He pressed the bell-shaped sterilizing muzzle against her skin and pulled the trigger. The hypo gun hummed briefly, ending its cycle with a large click.

"Does it work fast?" Brion asked.

"Couple of minutes. Just let her be and she'll come to by herself."

"Killer!" Ulv hissed from the doorway. His blowgun was in his hand, half raised to his mouth.

"He's been in the car—he's seen it!" Telt shouted and grabbed for his gun.

Brion sprang between them, raising his hands. "Stop it! No more killing!" he shouted this in Disan. Then he shook his fist at Telt. "Fire that gun and I'll stuff it down your throat. I'll handle this." He turned to face Ulv who hadn't raised the blowgun any closer to his lips. This was a good sign. The Disan was still uncertain.

"You have seen the body in the car, Ulv. So you must have seen that it is that of a magter. I killed him myself, because I would rather kill one, ten or even a hundred men rather than have everyone on this

planet destroyed. I killed him in a fair fight and now I am going to examine his body. There is something very strange and different about the magter, you know that yourself. If I can find out what it is, perhaps we can make them stop this war, and not bomb Nyjord."

Ulv was still angry, yet he lowered the blowgun a little. "I wish there were no offworlders, that none of you had ever come. Nothing was wrong until you started coming. The magter were the strongest, and they killed, but they also helped. Now they want to fight a war with your weapons and for this you are going to kill my world. And you want me to help you?"

"Not me—yourself!" Brion said wearily. "There's no going back, that's the one thing we can't do. Maybe Dis would have been better off without offplanet contact. Maybe not. In any case you have to forget about that. You have contact now with the rest of the galaxy, for better or for worse. You've got a problem to solve, and I'm here to help you solve it."

Seconds ticked by as Ulv, unmoving, fought with questions that were novel to his life. Could killing stop death? Could he help his people by helping strangers to fight and kill them? His world had changed and he didn't like it. He must make a giant effort to change with it.

Abruptly, he pushed the blowgun into a thong at his waist, turned and strode out.

"Too much for my nerves," Telt said, settling his gun back in the holster. "You don't know how happy I'm gonna be when this thing is over. Even if the planet goes bang, I don't care. I'm finished." He walked out to the sandcar, keeping a careful eye on the Disan crouched against the wall.

* * * *

Brion turned back to Lea whose eyes were open, staring at the ceiling. He went to her.

"Running," she said, and her voice had a toneless emptiness that screamed louder than any emotion. "They ran by the open door of my room and I could see them when they killed Dr. Stine. Just butchered him like an animal, chopping him down. Then one came into the room and that's all I remember." She turned her head slowly and looked at Brion. "What happened? Why am I here?"

"They're…dead," he told her. "All of them. After the raid the Disans blew up the building. You're the only one that survived. That was Ulv who came into your room, the Disan we met in the desert. He brought you away and hid you here in the city."

"When do we leave?" she said, in the same empty tones, turning her face to the wall. "When do we get off this planet?"

"Today is the last day. The deadline is midnight. Krafft will have a ship pick us up when we are ready. But we still have our job to do. I've got that body. You're going to have to examine it. We must find out about the magter—"

"Nothing can be done now except leave," her voice was a dull monotone. "There is only so much that a person can do and I've done it. Please have the ship come, I want to leave now."

Brion chewed his lip in helpless frustration. Nothing seemed to be able to penetrate the apathy she had sunk into. Too much shock, too much terror, in too short a time. He took her chin in his hand and turned her head to face him. She didn't resist, but her eyes were shining with tears, tears trickled down her cheeks.

"Take me home, Brion, please take me home."

He could only brush her sodden hair back from her face then and force himself to smile at her. The particles of time were running out, faster and faster, and he no longer knew what to do. The examination had to be made. Yet he couldn't force her. He looked for the medbox and saw that Telt had taken it back to the sandcar. There might be something in it that could help. A tranquilizer perhaps.

Telt had some of his instruments open on the chart table and was examining a tape with a pocket magnifier. He jumped nervously and put the tape behind his back when Brion entered, then relaxed when he saw who it was.

"Thought you were the creepie out there, coming for a look," he whispered. "Maybe you trust him—but I can't afford to. Can't even use the radio. I'm getting out of here now, I have to tell Hys!"

"Tell him what?" Brion asked sharply. "What is all the mystery about?"

Telt handed him the magnifier and tape. "Look at that. Recording tape from my scintillation counter. Red verticals are five-minute intervals, the wiggly black horizontal line is the radioactivity level. All this where the line goes up and down, that's when we were driving out to the attack. Varying hot level of the rock and ground."

"What's the big peak in the middle?"

"That coincides exactly with our visit to the house of horrors! When we went through the hole in the bottom of the tower!" He couldn't keep the enthusiasm out of his voice.

"Does it mean that—"

"I don't know. I'm not sure. I have to compare it with the other tapes back at base. It could be the stone of the tower, some of these heavy rocks got a high natural count. There maybe could be a box of instruments there with fluorescent dials. Or it might be one of those

tactical atom bombs they threw at us already, some arms runner sold them a few."

"Or it could be the cobalt bombs?"

"It could be," Telt said, packing his instruments swiftly. "A badly shielded bomb, or an old one with a crack in the skin, could give a trace like that. Just a little radon leaking out would do it."

"Why don't you call Hys on the radio, let him know."

"Don't want Grandaddy Krafft's listening posts to hear about it. This is our job—if I'm right. And I have to check my old tapes to make sure. But it's gonna be worth a raid, I can feel that in my bones. Let's unload your corpse." He helped Brion, then slipped into the driver's seat.

"Hold it," Brion said. "Do you have anything in the medbox I can use for Lea. She seems to have cracked. Not hysterical, but withdrawn. Won't listen to reason, won't do anything but lie there and ask to go home."

"Got the potion here," Telt said, cracking the medbox. "Slaughter-syndrome is what our medic calls it. Hit a lot of our boys. Grow up all your life hating the idea of violence, it goes rough when you have to start killing people. Guys breakup, breakdown, go to pieces lots of different ways. The medic mixed up this stuff. Don't know how it works, probably tranquilizers and some of the cortex drugs. But it peels off recent memories. Maybe for the last ten, twelve hours. You can't get upset about what you don't remember." He pulled out a sealed package. "Directions on the box. Good luck."

"Luck," Brion said, and shook the technician's calloused hand. "Let me know if the traces are strong enough to be bombs." He checked the street to make sure it was clear, then pressed the door button. The sandcar churned out into the brilliant sunshine and was gone, the throb of it's motor dying in the distance. Brion closed the door and went back to Lea. Ulv was still crouched against the wall.

* * * *

There was a one-shot disposable hypodermic in the box. Lea made no protest when he broke the seal and pressed the needle against her arm. She sighed and her eyes closed again. When he saw she was resting easily, he dragged in the tarpaulin-wrapped body of the magter. A workbench ran along one wall and he struggled the corpse up onto it. He unwrapped the tarpaulin and the sightless eyes stared accusingly up into his.

Using his knife, Brion cut away the loose, bloodsoaked clothing. Strapped under the clothes, around the man's waist, was the familiar

collection of Disan artifacts. This could have significance either way. Human or humanoid, it would still have to live on Dis. Brion threw it aside, along with the rest of the clothing. Nude, pierced, bloody, the corpse lay before him.

In every external physical detail the man was human.

Brion's theory was becoming more preposterous with each discovery. If the magter weren't alien, how could he explain their complete lack of emotions? A mutation of some kind? He didn't see how it was possible. There *had* to be something alien, about the dead man before him. The future of a world rested on this flimsy hope. If Telt's lead to the bombs proved to be false, there would be no hope left at all.

Lea was still unconscious when he looked at her. There was no way of telling how long the coma would last. He would probably have to waken her out of it, but didn't want to do it too early. It took an effort to control his impatience, even though he knew the drug needed time to work in. He finally decided on at least a minimum of an hour before he should try to disturb her. That would be noon—twelve hours before destruction.

One thing he should do was get in touch with Professor-Commander Krafft. Maybe it was being defeatist, yet he had to make sure that they had a way off this planet if the mission failed. Krafft had installed a relay radio that would forward calls from his personal set. If this relay had been in the Foundation building, contact was broken. This had to be found out before it was too late. He thumbed on his radio and sent the call. The reply came back instantly.

"This is fleet communications. Will you please keep this circuit open? Commander Krafft is waiting for this call and it is being put directly through to him now." Krafft's voice broke in while the operator was still talking.

"Who is making this call—is it anyone from the Foundation?" The old man's voice was shaky with emotion.

"Brandd here. I have Lea Morees with me—"

"No more? Are there no other survivors from the disaster that destroyed your building?"

"That's it, other than us it's a…complete loss. With the building and all the instruments gone I have no way to contact our ship in orbit. Can you arrange to get us out of here if necessary?"

"Give me your location, a ship is coming now—"

"I don't need a ship now," Brion interrupted. "Don't send it until I call. If there is a way to stop your destruction, I'll find it. So I'm staying—to the last minute if necessary."

Krafft was silent. There was just the crackle of an open mike and the sound of breathing. "That is your decision," he said finally. "I'll

have a ship standing by. But won't you let us take Miss Morees out now?"

"No. I need her here. We are still working, looking for—"

"What answer can you find that could possibly avert destruction now?" His tone was between hope and despair. Brion couldn't help him.

"If I succeed—you'll know. Otherwise, that will be the end of it. End of transmission." He switched the radio off.

Lea was sleeping easily when he looked at her, and there was still a good part of the hour left before he could wake her. How could he put it to use? She would need tools, instruments to examine the corpse, there were certainly none here. Perhaps there were some he could find in the ruins of the Foundation building. With this thought he had the sudden desire to see the wreckage up close, and talk to the men he had seen working there. There might be other survivors. He had to find out.

Ulv was still crouched against the wall in the outer room. He looked up angrily when Brion came over, but said nothing.

"Will you help me again?" Brion asked. "Stay and watch the girl while I go out. I'll be back at noon." Ulv didn't answer. "I am still looking for the way to save Dis," Brion said.

"Go, I'll watch the girl!" Ulv spat the words in impotent fury. "I do not know what to do. You may be right. Go. She will be safe with me."

Brion slipped out into the deserted street and half running, half walking, made his way towards the rubble that had been the Cultural Relationships Foundation. He used a different course than the one they had come by, striking first towards the outer edge of the city. Once there he could swing and approach from the other side, so there would be no indication where he had come from. The magter might be watching and he didn't want to lead them to Lea and the stolen body.

Turning a corner he saw a sandcar stopped in the street ahead. There was something familiar about the lines of it. It could be the one he and Telt had used, but he wasn't sure. He looked around, but the dusty, packed-dirt street was white and empty, shimmering in silence under the sun. Staying close to the wall and watching carefully, Brion slipped towards the car. When he came close to the rear tracks he was positive it was the one he had been in the night before. What was it doing here?

Silence and heat filled the street. Windows and doors were empty and there was no motion in their shadows. Putting his foot on a bogey wheel he reached up and grabbed the searing metal rim of the open window. He pulled himself up and stared at Telt's smiling face.

Smiling in death. The lips pulled back to reveal the grinning teeth, the eyes bursting from the head, the features swollen and contorted from the deadly poison. A tiny, tufted dart of wood stuck innocently in the brown flesh on the side of his neck.

CHAPTER XV

Brion hurled himself backward and sprawled flat in the dust and filth of the road. No poison dart sought him out, the empty silence still reigned. Telt's murderers had come and gone. Moving quickly, using the bulk of the car as a shield, he opened the door and slipped inside.

They had done a thorough job of destruction. All of the controls had been battered into uselessness, the floor was a junk heap of crushed equipment, intertwined with loops of recording tape bulging like mechanical intestines. A gutted machine, destroyed like its driver.

It was easy enough to reconstruct what had happened. The car had been seen when they entered the city—probably by some of the magter who had destroyed the Foundation building. They had not seen where it had gone, or Brion would surely be dead by now. But they must have spotted it when Telt tried to leave the city. And stopped it in the most effective way possible, a dart through the open window into the unsuspecting driver's neck.

Telt dead. The brutal impact of the man's death had driven all thought of its consequences from Brion's mind. Now he began to realize. Telt had never sent word of his discovery of the radioactive trace to the Nyjord army. He had been afraid to use the radio, and had wanted to tell Hys in person, and to show him the tape. Only now the tape was torn and mixed with all the others, the brain that could have analyzed it dead.

Brion looked at the dangling entrails of the radio and spun for the door. Running swiftly and erratically he fled from the sandcar. His own survival and the possible survival of Dis depended on his not being seen near it. He must contact Hys and pass on the information. Until he did that he was the only offworlder on Dis who knew which magter tower might contain the world-destroying bombs.

Once out of sight of the sandcar he went slower, wiping the sweat from his streaming face. He hadn't been seen leaving the car, and he wasn't being followed. The streets here weren't familiar, but he checked his direction by the sun and walked at a steady fast pace towards the destroyed building. More of the native Disans were in the streets now. They all noticed him, some even stopped and scowled fiercely. With his empathic awareness he felt their anger and hatred. A knot of men radiated death and he put his hand on his gun as he passed them. Two of them had their blowguns ready, but didn't use

them. By the time he had turned the next corner he was soaked with nervous perspiration.

Ahead was the rubble of the destroyed building. Grounded next to it was the tapered form of a spacer's pinnace. Two men had come from the open lock and were standing at the edge of the burnt area.

* * * *

Brion's boots grated loudly on the broken wreckage. The men turned quickly towards him, guns raised. Both of them carried ion-rifles. They relaxed when they saw his offworld clothes.

"Savages," one of them growled. He was a heavyplanet man, a squashed down column of muscle and gristle, whose head barely reached Brion's chest. A pushed-back cap had the crossed-sliderule symbol of ship's computer man.

"Can't blame them, I guess," the second man said. He wore purser's insignia. His features were different, but with the same compacted body they were as physically alike as twins. Probably from the same home planet. "They gonna get their whole world blown from under them at midnight. Looks like the poor slob in the streets finally realized what is happening. Hope we're in jump-space by then. I saw Estrada's World get it and I don't want to see that again, not twice in one lifetime!"

The computer man was looking closely at Brion, head tilted sideways to see his face. "You need transportation offworld?" he asked. "We're the last ship at the port, and we're going to boil out of here as soon as the rest of our cargo is aboard. Give you a lift if you need it."

Only by a tremendous effort at control did Brion conceal the destroying sorrow that overwhelmed him when he looked at that shattered wasteland, the graveyard of so many. "No," he said. "That won't be necessary. I'm in touch with the blockading fleet and they'll pick me up before midnight."

"You from Nyjord?" the purser growled.

"No," Brion said, still only half aware of the men. "But there is trouble with my own ship." He realized that they were looking intently at him, that he owed them some kind of explanation. "I thought I could find a way to stop the war. Now…I'm not so sure." He hadn't intended to be so frank with the spacemen, but the words had been topmost in his thoughts and had simply slipped out.

The computer man started to say something, but his shipmate speared him in the side with his elbow. "We blast soon—and I don't like the way these Disans are looking at us. Captain said to find out

what caused the fire, then get back. So let's go."

"Don't miss your ship," the computer man said to Brion and started for the pinnace. Then he hesitated and turned. "Sure there's nothing we can do for you."

Sorrow would accomplish nothing. Brion fought to sweep the dregs of emotion from his mind and to think clearly. "You can help me," he said. "I could use a scalpel or any other surgical instruments you might have." Lea would need those. Then he remembered Telt's undelivered message. "Do you have a portable radio transceiver—I can pay you for it."

The computer man vanished inside the rocket and reappeared a minute later with a small package. "There's a scalpel and a magnetized tweezers in here, all I could find in the medkit. Hope they'll do." He reached inside and swung out the metal case of a self-contained transceiver. "Take this, it's got plenty of range, even on the longer frequencies." He raised his hand at Brion's offer to pay. "My donation," he said. "If you can save this planet, I'll give you the whole pinnace as well. We'll tell the captain we lost the radio in some trouble with the natives. Isn't that right, Moneybags?" He prodded the purser in the chest with a finger that would have punched a hole in a weaker man.

"I read you loud and clear," the purser said. "I'll make out an invoice so stating, back in the ship." They were both in the pinnace then, and Brion had to move fast to get clear of the take-off blast.

* * * *

Sense of obligation, the spacemen had felt it too. The realization of this raised Brion's spirits a bit as he searched through the rubble for anything useful. He recognized part of a wall still standing as a corner of the laboratory. Poking through the ruins he unearthed broken instruments and a single, battered case that had barely missed destruction. Inside was the binocular microscope, the right tube bent, its lenses cracked and obscured. The left eyepiece still seemed to be functioning. Brion carefully put it back in the case. He looked at his watch.

It was almost noon. These few pieces of equipment would have to do for the dissection. Watched suspiciously by the onlooking Disans, he started back to the warehouse. It was a long, circuitous walk, since he didn't dare give any clues to his destination. Only when he was positive he had not been observed or followed did he slip through the building's entrance, locking it behind him.

Lea's frightened eyes met his when he went into the office. "A

friendly smile here among the cannibals," she called. Her strained expression gave the lie to the cheeriness of her words. "What has happened? Since I woke up, the great stone face over there," she pointed to Ulv, "has been telling me exactly nothing."

"What's the last thing you can remember?" Brion asked carefully. He didn't want to tell her too much, less this bring on the shock again. Ulv had shown great presence of mind in not talking to her.

"If you must know," Lea said, "I remember quite a lot, Brion Brandd. I shan't go into details, since this sort of thing is best kept from the natives. For the record then, I can recall going to sleep after you left. And nothing since then. It's weird. I went to sleep in that lumpy hospital bed and woke up on this couch. Feeling simply terrible. With *him* just simply sitting there and scowling at me. Won't you please tell me what is going on?"

A partial truth was best, saving all of the details that he could for later. "The magter attacked the Foundation building," he said. "They are getting angry at all offworlders now. You were still knocked out by a sleeping drug, so Ulv helped bring you here. It's afternoon now —"

"Of the last day?" She sounded horrified. "While I'm playing sleeping beauty the world is coming to an end. Was anyone hurt in the attack? Or killed?"

"There were a number of casualties—and plenty of trouble," Brion said. He had to get her off the subject. Walking over to the corpse he threw back the cover from its face. "But this is more important right now. It's one of the magter. I have a scalpel and some other things here—will you perform an autopsy?"

Lea huddled back on the couch, her arms around herself, looking chilled in spite of the heat of the day. "What happened to the people at the building?" she asked in a thin voice. The injection had removed her memories of the tragedy, but echoes of the strain and shock still reverberated in her mind and body. "I feel so…exhausted. Please tell me what happened. I have the feeling you're hiding something."

Brion sat next to her and took her hands in his, not surprised to find them cold. Looking into her eyes he tried to give her some of his strength. "It wasn't very nice," he said. "You were shaken up by it, I imagine that's why you feel the way you do now. But—Lea, you'll have to take my word for this. Don't ask any more questions. There's nothing we can do now about it. But we can still find out about the magter. Will you examine the corpse?"

She tried to ask something, then changed her mind. When she dropped her eyes Brion felt the thin shiver that went through her body. "There's something terribly wrong," she said. "I know that. I guess I'll have to take your word that it's best not to ask questions.

Help me up, will you, darling? My legs are absolutely liquid."

Leaning on him, with his arm around her supporting most of her weight, she went slowly across to the corpse. She looked down and shuddered. "Not what you would call a natural death," she said. Ulv watched intently as she took the scalpel out of its holder. "You don't have to look at this," she told him in halting Disan. "Not if you don't want to."

"I want to," he told her, not taking his eyes from the body. "I have never seen a magter dead before, or without covering, like ordinary people." He continued to stare fixedly.

"Find me some drinking water, will you Brion," Lea said. "And spread the tarp under the body. These things are quite messy."

* * * *

After drinking the water she seemed stronger, and could stand without holding onto the table with both hands. Placing the tip of the scalpel just below the magter's breast bone, she made the long continuous post-mortem incision down to the pubic symphysis. The great, body-length wound gaped open like a red mouth. Across the table Ulv shuddered but didn't avert his eyes.

One by one she dissected the internal organs and removed them. Once she looked up at Brion, then quickly returned to work. The silence stretched on and on until Brion had to break it.

"Tell me, can't you. Have you found out anything?"

His words snapped the thin strand of her strength, and she staggered back to the couch and collapsed on to it. Her blood-stained hands hung over the side, making a strangely terrible contrast to the whiteness of her skin.

"I'm sorry, Brion," she said. "But there's nothing, nothing at all. There are minor differences, organic changes I've never seen before—his liver is tremendous for one thing. But changes like this are certainly consistent within the pattern of Homo sapiens as adopted to a different planet. He's a man. Changed, adopted, modified—but still just as human as you or I."

"How can you be sure?" Brion broke in. "You haven't examined him completely, have you?" She shook her head now. "Then go on. The other organs. His brain. A microscopic examination. Here!" he said, pushing the microscope case towards her with both hands.

She dropped her head onto her forearms and sobbed. "Leave me alone, can't you! I'm tired and sick and fed up with this awful planet. Let them die. I don't care! Your theory is false, useless. Admit that! And let me wash the filth from my hands—" Sobbing drowned out her

words.

Brion stood over her and drew in a shuddering breath. Was he wrong? He didn't dare think about that. He had to go on. Looking down at the thinness of her bent back, with the tiny projections of her spine pushing through the thin cloth, he felt an immense pity—a pity he couldn't surrender to. This thin, helpless, frightened woman was his only resource. She had to work. He had to *make* her work.

Ihjel had done it. Used projective empathy to impress his emotions upon Brion. Now Brion must do it with Lea. There had been some sessions in the art, but not nearly enough to make him proficient. Nevertheless he had to try.

Strength was what Lea needed. Aloud he said simply "You can do it. You have the will and the strength to finish." And silently his mind cried out the order to obey, to share his power now that hers was drained and finished.

Only when she lifted her face and he saw the dried tears did he realize that he had succeeded. "You will go on?" he asked simply.

Lea merely nodded and rose to her feet. She shuffled like a sleep-walker, jerked along by invisible strings. Her strength wasn't her own and it reminded him unhappily of that last event of the Twenties when he had experienced the same kind of draining activity. Wiping her hands roughly on her clothes she opened the microscope case.

"The slides are all broken," she said.

"This will do," Brion told her, crashing his heel through the glass partition. Shards tinkled and crashed to the floor. He took some of the bigger pieces and broke them to rough squares that would fit under the clips on the stage. Lea accepted them without a word. Putting a drop of the magter's blood on the slide she bent over the eyepiece.

* * * *

Her hands shook when she tried to adjust the focusing. Using low power she examined the specimen, squinting through the angled tube. Once she turned the substage mirror a bit to catch direct the light streaming in the window. Brion stood behind her, fists clenched, forcefully controlling his anxiety. "What do you see?" he finally blurted out.

"Phagocytes, platelets… leucocytes… everything seems normal." Her voice was dull, exhausted, her eyes blinking with fatigue as she stared into the tube.

Anger at defeat burned through Brion. Even faced with failure he refused to accept it. He reached over her shoulder and savagely twisted the turret of microscope until the longest lens was in position.

“If you can’t see anything—try the high power! It’s there—I know it’s there! I’ll get you a tissue specimen.” He turned back to the disemboweled cadaver.

His back was turned and he did not see the sudden stiffening of her shoulders, or the sudden eagerness that seized her fingers as they adjusted the focus. But he did feel the wave of emotion that welled from her, impinging directly on his empathic sense. “What is it?” he called to her, as if she had spoken aloud.

“Something…something here,” she said, “in this leucocyte. It’s not a normal structure, but it’s familiar. I’ve seen something like it before, but I just can’t remember.” She turned away from the scope and unthinkingly pressed her gory knuckles to her forehead. “I know I’ve seen it before.”

Brion squinted into the deserted microscope and made out a dim shape in the center of the field. It stood out sharply when he focused—the white, jellyfish shape of a single-celled leucocyte. To his untrained eye there was nothing unusual about it. He couldn’t know what was strange—when he had no idea of what was normal.

“Do you see those spherical green shapes grouped together?” Lea asked. Before Brion could answer she gasped “I remember now!” Her fatigue was forgotten in her excitement. “*Icerya purchasi* that was the name, something like that. It’s a coccid, a little scale insect. It had those same shapes collected together within its individual cells.”

“What do they mean? What is the connection with Dis?”

“I don’t know,” she said, “it’s just that they look so similar. And I never saw anything like this in a human cell before. In the coccids, the green particles grow into a kind of yeast that lives within the insect. Not a parasite, but a real symbiote—”

Her eyes opened wide as she caught the significance of her own words. A symbiote—and Dis was the world where symbiosis and parasitism had become more advanced and complex than on any other planet. Lea’s thoughts spun around this fact and chewed at the fringes of the logic. Brion could sense her concentration and absorption. He did nothing to break the mood. Her hands were clenched into fists, her eyes staring unseeingly at the wall as her mind raced.

* * * *

Brion and Ulv sat quietly, watching her, waiting for her conclusions. The pieces were falling into shape at last.

Lea opened her clenched fists and smoothed them on her sodden skirt. She blinked and turned until she saw Brion. “Is there a tool box here?” she asked.

Her words were so unexpected that it took Brion a moment to answer. Before he could say anything she spoke again.

"No hand tools, it would take too long. Could you find anything like a power saw—that would be ideal?" She turned back to the microscope, so he didn't have any opportunity to question her. Ulv was still looking at the body of the magter and had understood nothing of what they had said. Brion went out into the loading bay.

There was nothing he could use on the ground floor, so he took the stairs to the floor above. A corridor here passed by a number of rooms. All of the doors were locked, including one with the hopeful sign TOOL ROOM on it. He battered at the metal door with his shoulder without budging it. As he stopped to look for a way in he glanced at his watch.

Two o'clock! In ten hours the bombs would fall on Dis.

The need for haste tore at him. Yet there could be no noise—someone in the street might hear it. He quickly stripped off his shirt and wrapped it in a loose roll around the barrel of his gun, extending it in a loose tube in front of the barrel. Holding the rolled cloth in his left hand, he jammed the gun up tight against the door, the muzzle against the lock. The single shot was only a dull thud, inaudible outside of the building. Pieces of broken mechanism jarred and rattled inside the lock and the door swung open.

Lea was standing by the body when he came back, holding up the small power saw with a rotary blade. "Will this do?" he asked. "Runs off its own battery, almost fully charged, too."

"Perfect," she answered. "You're both going to have to help me." She switched into the Disan language. "Ulv, would you find some place where you can watch the street without being seen. Signal me when it is empty. I'm afraid this saw is going to make a lot of noise."

Ulv nodded and went out into the bay, climbing a heap of empty crates so he could peer through the small windows set high in the wall. He looked carefully in both directions, then waved to her to go ahead.

"Stand to one side and hold the cadaver's chin, Brion," she said. "Hold it firmly so the head doesn't shake around when I cut. This is going to be a little gruesome. I'm sorry. But it'll be the fastest way to cut the bone." The saw bit into the skull.

Once Ulv waved them into silence, and shrank back himself into the shadows next to the window. They waited impatiently until he gave them a sign to continue again. Brion held steady while the saw cut a circle completely around the skull.

"Finished," Lea said and the saw dropped from her limp fingers to the floor. She massaged life back into her hands before she finished the job. Carefully and delicately she removed the cap of bone from the

magter's head, exposing his brain to the shaft of light from the window.

"You were right all the time, Brion," she said. "There is your alien."

PART 5

CHAPTER XVI

Ulv joined them as they looked down at the exposed brain of the magter. The thing was so clearly evident that even Ulv noticed it.

"I have seen dead animals and my people dead with their heads open, but I have never seen anything like that before," he said.

"What is it?" Brion asked.

"The invader, the alien you were looking for," Lea told him.

The magter's brain was only two-thirds of its normal size. Instead of filling the skull completely, it shared the space with a green, amorphous shape. This was ridged somewhat like a brain, but the green shape had still darker nodules and extensions. Lea took her scalpel and gently prodded the dark moist mass.

"It reminds me very much of something that I've seen before on Earth," she said. "The green-fly—*Drepanosiphum platanoides*—and an unusual organ it has, called the pseudova. Now that I have seen this growth in the magter's skull I can think of a positive parallel. The fly *Drepanosiphum* also has a large green organ, only it fills half of the body cavity instead of the head. Its identity puzzled biologists for years, and they had a number of complex theories to explain it away. Finally someone managed to dissect and examine it. The pseudova turned out to be a living plant, a yeastlike growth that helps with the green-fly's digestion. It produces enzymes that enable the fly to digest the great amounts of sugar it gets from plant juice."

"That's not unusual," Brion said, puzzled. "Termites and human beings are a couple of other creatures whose digestion is helped by internal flora. What's the difference in the green-fly?"

"Reproduction, mainly. All the other gut-living plants have to enter the host and establish themselves as outsiders, permitted to remain as long as they are useful. The green-fly and its yeast plant have a permanent symbiotic relationship that is essential to the existence of both. The plant spores appear in many places throughout the fly's body—but they are *always* in the germ cells. Every egg cell has some, and every egg that grows to maturity is infected with the plant spores. The continuation of the symbiosis is unbroken and guaranteed.

"Do you think those green spheres in the magter's blood cells could be the same kind of thing?" Brion asked.

"I'm sure of it," Lea said. "It must be the same process. There are probably green spheres throughout the magters' bodies, spores or

offspring of those things in their brains. Enough will find their way to the germ cells to make sure that every young magter is infected at birth. While the child is growing—so is the symbiote. Probably a lot faster since it seems to be a simpler organism. I imagine it is well established in the brain pan within the first six months of the infant's life."

"But why?" Brion asked. "What does it do?"

"I'm only guessing now, but there is plenty of evidence that gives us an idea of its function. I'm willing to bet that the symbiote itself is not a simple organism, it's probably an amalgam of plant and animal like most of the other creatures on Dis. The thing is just too complex to have developed since mankind has been on this planet. The magter must have caught the symbiotic infection by eating some Disan animal. The symbiote lived and flourished in its new environment. Well protected by a bony skull in a long-lived host. In exchange for food, oxygen and comfort, the brain-symbiote must generate hormones and enzymes that enable the magter to survive. Some of these might aid digestion, enabling the magter to eat any plant or animal life they can lay their hands on. The symbiote might produce sugars, scavenge the blood of toxins—there are so many things it could do. Things it must have done, since the magter are obviously the dominant life form on this planet. They paid a high price for their symbiote, but it didn't really matter to race-survival until now. Did you notice that the magter's brain is no smaller than normal?"

"It must be—or how else could that brain-symbiote fit in inside the skull with it?" Brion said.

"If the magter's total brain were smaller in volume than normal, it could fit into the remaining space in the cranial hollow. But the brain is full-sized—it is just that part of it is missing, absorbed by the symbiote."

"The frontal lobes," Brion said with sudden realization. "This hellish growth has performed a prefrontal lobotomy!"

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"It's done even more than that," Lea said, separating the convolutions of the gray matter with her scalpel to uncover a green filament beneath. "These tendrils penetrate farther back into the brain, but always remain in the cerebrum. The cerebellum appears to be untouched. Apparently just the higher functions of mankind have been interfered with, selectively. Destruction of the frontal lobes made the magter creatures without emotions or ability for really abstract thought. Apparently they survived better without these. There must

have been some horrible failures before the right balance was struck. The final product is a man-plant-animal symbiote that is admirably adapted for survival on this disaster world. No emotions to cause complications or desires that might interfere with pure survival. Complete ruthlessness—mankind has always been strong on this anyway, so it didn't take much of a push."

"The other Disans, like Ulv here, managed to survive without turning into such a creature. So why was it necessary for the magter to go so far?"

"Nothing is necessary in evolution, you know that," Lea said. "Many variations are possible and all the better ones continue. You might say that Ulv's people survive, but the magter survive better. If offworld contact hadn't been re-established, I imagine that the magter would slowly have become the dominant race. Only they won't have the chance now. It looks as though they have succeeded in destroying both races with their suicidal urge."

"That's the part that doesn't make sense," Brion said. "The magter have survived and climbed right to the top of the evolutionary heap here. Yet they are suicidal. How come they haven't been wiped out before this?"

"Individually they have been aggressive to the point of suicide. They will attack anything and everything with the same savage lack of emotion. Luckily there are no bigger animals on this planet. So where they have died as individuals, their utter ruthlessness has guaranteed their survival as a group. Now they are faced with a problem that is too big for their half-destroyed minds to handle. Their personal policy has become their planetary policy—and that's never a very smart thing. They are like men with knives who have killed all the men who were only armed with stones. Now they are facing men with guns and they are going to keep charging and fighting until they are all dead."

"It's a perfect case of the utter impartiality of the forces of evolution. Men infected by this Disan life form were the dominant creatures on this planet. The creature in the magters' brains was a true symbiote then, giving something and receiving something. Making a union of symbiotes where all were stronger together than any could be separately. Now this is changed. The magter brain cannot understand the concept of racial death, in a situation where it must understand to be able to survive. Therefore, the brain-creature is no longer a symbiote but a parasite."

"And as a parasite it must be destroyed!" Brion broke in. "We're not fighting shadows any more," he exulted. "We've found the enemy—and it's not the magter at all. Just a sort of glorified tapeworm that is too stupid to know when it is killing itself off. Does it have a brain—can it think?"

"I doubt it very much," Lea said. "A brain would be of absolutely no use to it. So even if it originally possessed reasoning powers they would be gone by now. Symbiotes or parasites that live internally like this always degenerate to an absolute minimum of functions…."

"Tell me about it? What is this thing?" Ulv broke in, producing the soft form of the brain-symbiote. He had heard all their excited talk but had not understood a word.

"Explain it to him, will you Lea, as best you can," Brion said, looking at her and realized how exhausted she was. "And sit down while you do it, you're long overdue for a rest. I'm going to try—" He broke off when he looked at his watch.

* * * *

It was after four in the afternoon—less than eight hours to go. What was he to do? Enthusiasm faded as he realized that only half of the problem was solved. The bombs would drop on schedule unless the Nyjorders could understand the significance of this discovery. Even if they understood—would it make any difference to them? The threat of the hidden cobalt bombs would not be changed.

With this thought came the guilty realization that he had forgotten completely about Telt's death. Even before he contacted the Nyjord fleet he must tell Hys and his rebel army what had happened to Telt and his sandcar. Also about the radioactive traces. They couldn't be checked against the records now to see how important they might be, but Hys might make another raid on the strength of the suspicion. This call wouldn't take long, then he would be free to tackle Professor-Commander Krafft.

Carefully setting the transmitter on the frequency of the rebel army, he sent out a call to Hys. There was no answer.

There was always a chance the set was broken. He quickly twisted the transmitter to the frequency of his personal radio, then whistled in the microphone. The received signal was so loud that it hurt his ears. He tried to call Hys again, and was relieved to get a response this time.

"Brion Brandd here, can you read me? I want to talk to Hys at once."

Shockingly, it was Professor-Commander Krafft who answered.

"I'm sorry Brion, but it's impossible to talk to Hys. We are monitoring his frequency and your call was relayed to me. Hys and his rebels lifted ship about a half an hour ago, and are already on the way back to Nyjord. Are you ready to leave now? It will soon become dangerous to make any landings. Even now I will have to ask for

volunteers to get you out of there."

Hys and the rebel army gone. Brion assimilated the thought at the same moment he realized he was talking to Krafft. He was thrown off balance, not prepared for the encounter.

"If they're gone—well, then there's nothing I can do about it," Brion said. "I was going to call you, so I can talk to you now. Listen and try to understand. You must cancel the bombing. I've found out about the magter, found what causes their mental aberration. If we can correct that, we can stop them from attacking Nyjord—"

"Can they be corrected by midnight tonight?" Krafft broke in. He was abrupt and sounded annoyed. Even saints get tired.

"No, of course not." Brion frowned at the microphone, realizing the talk was going all wrong, but not knowing how to fix it. "But it won't take too long. I have evidence here that will convince you that what I say is the truth."

"I believe you without seeing it, Brion." The trace of anger was gone from Krafft's voice now and it was heavy with fatigue and defeat. "I'll admit you are probably right. A little while ago I admitted to Hys, too, that he was probably right in his original estimation of the correct way to tackle the problem of Dis. We have made a lot of mistakes, and in making them we have run out of time. I'm afraid that is the only fact that is relevant now. The bombs fall at twelve and even then they may drop too late. A ship is already on its way from Nyjord with my replacement. I exceeded my authority by running a day past the maximum the technicians gave me. I realize now I was gambling the life of my own world in the vain hope I could save Dis. They can't be saved. They're dead. I won't hear any more about it."

"You must listen—"

"I must destroy the planet below me, that is what I must do. That fact will not be changed by anything you say. All the offworlders—other than your party—are gone. I'm sending a ship down now to pick you up. As soon as that ship lifts I am going to drop the first bombs. Now—tell me where you are so they can come for you."

"Don't threaten me, Krafft!" Brion shook his fist at the radio in an excess of anger. "You're a killer and a world destroyer, don't try and make yourself out as anything else. I have the knowledge to avert this slaughter and you won't listen to me. And I know where the cobalt bombs are—in the magter tower that Hys raided last night. Get those bombs and there is no need to drop any of your own!"

"I'm sorry, Brion. I appreciate what you're trying to do, yet at the same time I know the futility of it. I'm not going to accuse you of lying, but do you realize how thin your evidence sounds from this end? First a dramatic discovery of the cause of the magters' intransigency. Then, when that had no results, you suddenly

remember that you know where the bombs are. The best kept magter secret…."

"I don't know for sure, but there is a very good chance," Brion said, trying to repair his defenses. "Telt made readings, he had other records of radioactivity in this same magter keep. Proof that something is there. But Telt is dead now, the records destroyed. Don't you see—" He broke off, realizing how vague and unprovable his case was. This was defeat.

The radio was silent, with just the hum of the carrier wave as Krafft waited for him to continue. When Brion did speak his voice was empty of all hope.

"Send your ship down," he said tiredly. "We're in a building that belonged to the Light Metals Trust Ltd., a big warehouse of some kind. I don't know the address here, but I'm sure you have someone there who can find it. We'll be waiting for you."

"You win Krafft."

He turned off the radio.

CHAPTER XVII

"Do you mean what you said, about giving up?" Lea asked. Brion realized that she had stopped talking to Ulv some time ago, and had been listening to his conversation with Krafft. He shrugged, trying to put his feeling into words.

"We've tried—and almost succeeded. But if they won't listen what can we do? What can one man possibly do against a fleet loaded with H-bombs?"

As if in answer to his question Ulv's voice drowned him out. The harsh Disan words slashing the silence of the room.

"Kill you, the enemy!" he said. "Kill you *umedvirk*!"

He shouted the last word and his hand flashed to his belt. In a single swift motion he lifted his blowgun and placed it to his lips. A tiny dart quivered in the already dead flesh of the creature in the magter's skull. The action had all the symbolism of a broken lance, the declaration of war.

"Ulv understands it a lot better than you might think," Lea said. "He knows things about symbiosis and mutualism that would get him a job as a lecturer in any university on Earth. He knows just what the brain-symbiote is and what it does. They even have a word for it, one that never appeared in our Disan language lessons. A life form that you can live with or co-operate with is called *medvirk*. One that works to destroy you is *umedvirk*. He also understands that life forms can change, and be *medvirk* or *umedvirk* at different times. He has just decided that the brain symbiote is *umedvirk* and is out to kill it. So will

the rest of the Disans as soon as he can show them the evidence and explain."

"You're sure of this," Brion asked, interested in spite of himself.

"Positive. The Disans have a very absolute attitude towards survival, you should realize that. Not the same as the magter, but not much different in the results. They will kill the brain-symbiote, even if it means killing every magter who harbors one."

"If that is the case, we can't leave now," Brion said. With these words it suddenly became very clear what he had to do. "The ship is coming down now from the fleet. Get in it and take the body of the magter. I won't go."

"Where will you be?" she asked.

"Fighting the magter. My presence on the planet means that Krafft won't keep his threat to drop the bombs any earlier than the midnight deadline. That would be deliberately murdering me. I doubt if my presence past midnight will stop him, but it should keep the bombs away at least until then."

"What will you accomplish besides committing suicide?" Lea pleaded. "You just told me how a single man can't stop the bombs. What will happen to you at midnight?"

"I'll be dead—but in spite of that I can't run away. Not now. I must do everything possible right up until the last instant. Ulv and I will go to the magter tower, try to find out if the bombs are there. He will fight on our side now. He may even know more about the bombs, things that he didn't want to tell me before. We can get help from his people. Some of them must know where the bombs are, being native to this planet." Lea started to say something, but he rushed on, drowning out her words.

"You have just as big a job. Show the magter to Krafft, explain the significance of the brain-parasite to him. Try and get him to talk to Hys about the last raid. Try to get him to hold off the attack. I'll keep the radio with me and as soon as I know anything I'll call in. This is all last resort, finger in the dike kind of stuff, but it is all we can do."

"Because if we do nothing it means the end of Dis."

Lea tried to argue with him, but he wouldn't listen to her. He only kissed her, and with a lightness he did not feel tried to convince her that everything would be all right. In their hearts they both knew it wasn't, yet they left it that way because it was the least painful solution.

* * * *

A sudden rumbling shook the building and the windows darkened

as a ship settled in the street outside. The Nyjord crew came in with guns pointed, alert for anything. With a little convincing they took the cadaver, as well as Lea, when they lifted ship. Brion watched the spacer become a pinpoint in the sky and vanish. He shrugged his shoulders, trying to shake off the feeling that this was the last time he would see any of them.

"Let's get out of here fast," he told Ulv, picking up the radio. "Before anyone comes around to see why the ship landed."

"What will you do," Ulv asked, as they went down the street towards the desert. "What can we do in the few hours we have left?" He pointed at the sun, nearing the horizon. Brion shifted the weight of the radio to his other hand before replying.

"Get to the magter tower we raided last night, that's the best chance. The bombs might be there. Unless you know where the bombs are?"

Ulv shook his head. "I do not know, but some of my people may. We will capture a magter then kill him so they can all see the *umedvirk*. Then they will tell us everything they know."

"The tower first then, for bombs or a sample magter. What's the fastest way we can get there?"

Ulv frowned in thought. "If you can drive one of the cars the offworlders use, I know where there are some locked in buildings in this city. None of my people know how they are made to move."

"I can work them—let's go."

Chance was with them this time. The first sandcar they found still had the keys in the lock. It was battery powered, but contained a full charge. Much quieter than the heavy atomic cars it sped smoothly out of the city and across the sand. Ahead of them the sun sank in a red wave of color and it was six o'clock. By the time they reached the tower it was seven and Brion's nerves felt as if they were writhing under his skin.

Even though it looked like suicide, attacking the tower brought blessed relief. It was movement and action, and for moments at a time he forgot the bombs hanging over his head.

The attack was nerve-wrackingly anticlimactic. They used the main entrance, Ulv ranging soundlessly ahead. There was no one in sight. Once inside they crept down towards the lower rooms where the radiation had been detected. Only gradually did they realize that the magter tower was completely empty.

"Everyone gone," Ulv grunted, sniffing the air in every room that they passed. "Many magter were here earlier, they are gone now."

"Do they often desert their towers?" Brion asked.

"Never. I have never heard of it happening before. I can think of no reason why they should do a thing like this."

"Well I can," Brion told him. "They would leave their home if they took something with them of greater value. The bombs. If the bombs were hidden here, they might move them after the attack." Sudden fear hit him. "Or they might move them because it is time to take them—to the launcher! Let's get out of here, the quickest way we can."

"I smell air from outside," Ulv said, "coming from down there. This cannot be, because the magter have no entrances this low in their towers."

"We blasted one in earlier—that could be it. Can you find it?"

Moonlight shone ahead as they turned an angle of the corridor, and stars were visible through the gaping opening in the wall.

"It looks bigger than it was," Brion said, "as if the magter enlarged it." He looked through and saw the tracks on the sand outside. "As if they enlarged it to bring something bulky up from below—and carried it away in whatever made those tracks!"

* * * *

Using the opening themselves they ran back to the sandcar. Brion ground it fiercely around and turned the headlights on the tracks. There were the marks of a sandcar's treads, half obscured by thin, unmarked wheel tracks. He turned off the lights and forced himself to move slowly and to do an accurate job. A quick glimpse of his watch showed him there were four hours left to go. The moonlight was bright enough to illuminate the tracks. Driving with one hand he turned on the radio transmitter, already set for Krafft's wave length.

When the operator acknowledged his signal Brion reported what they had discovered and his conclusions. "Get that message to Commander Krafft now. I can't wait to talk to him—I'm following the tracks." He killed the transmission and stamped on the accelerator. The sandcar churned and bounced down the track.

"They are going to the mountains," Ulv said half an hour later, as the tracks still pointed straight ahead. "There are caves here and many magter have been seen near them, that is what I have heard."

The guess was correct. Before nine o'clock the ground humped into a range of foothills and the darker masses of mountains could be seen behind them, rising up to obscure the stars.

"Stop the car here," Ulv said, "The caves begin not too far ahead. There may be magter watching or listening, so we must go quietly."

Brion followed the deep-cut grooves, carrying the radio. Ulv came and went on both sides, silently as a shadow, scouting for hidden watchers. As far as he could discover there were none.

By nine-thirty Brion realized they had deserted the sandcar too soon. The tracks wound on and on, and seemed to have no end. They passed some caves, Ulv pointed them out to him, but the tracks never stopped. Time was running out and the nightmare stumbling through the darkness continued.

"More caves ahead," Ulv said. "Go quietly."

They came cautiously to the crest of the hill, as they had done so many times before, and looked into the shallow valley beyond. Sand covered the valley floor, and the light of the setting moon shone over the tracks at a flat angle, setting them off sharply as lines of shadow. They ran straight across the sandy valley and disappeared into the dark mouth of a cave on the far side.

Sinking back behind the hilltop, Brion covered the pilot light with his hand and turned on the transmitter. Ulv stayed above him, staring at the opening of the cave.

"This is an important message," Brion whispered into the mike, "Please record." He repeated this for thirty seconds, glancing at his watch to make sure of the time, since the seconds of waiting stretched to minutes in his brain. Then, clearly as possible without raising his voice above a whisper, he told of the discovery of the tracks and the cave.

"…The bombs may or may not be in here, but we are going in to find out. I'll leave my personal transmitter here with the broadcast power turned on, so you can home on its signal. That will give you a directional beacon to find the cave. I'm taking the other radio in, it has more power. If we can't get back to the entrance, I'll try a signal from inside. I doubt if you will hear it because of the rock, but I'll try. End of transmission. Don't try to answer me because I have the receiver turned off. There are no earphones on this set and the speaker would be too loud here."

He switched off, held his thumb on the button for an instant, then flicked it back on.

"Good-by, Lea," he said, and killed the power for good.

* * * *

They circled and reached the rocky wall of the cliff. Creeping silently in the shadows here they slipped up on the dark entrance of the cave. Nothing moved ahead and there was no sound from the entrance of the cave. Brion glanced at his watch and was instantly sorry.

Ten-thirty.

The last shelter concealing them was five meters from the cave.

They started to rise, to rush the final distance when Ulv suddenly waved Brion down. He pointed to his nose, then to the cave. He could smell the magter there.

A dark figure separated itself from the greater darkness of the cave mouth. Ulv acted instantly. He stood up and his hand went to his mouth; air hissed faintly through the tube in his hand. Without a noise the magter folded and fell to the ground. Before the body hit Ulv crouched low and rushed in. There was the sudden scuffling of feet on the floor, then silence.

Brion walked in, gun ready and alert, not knowing what he would find. His toe pushed against a body on the ground and from the darkness Ulv whispered. “There were only two. We can go on now.”

Finding their way through the cave was a maddening torture. They had no light, nor could they dare use one if they had. There were no wheel marks to follow on the stone floor. Without Ulv’s sensitive nose they would have been completely lost. The caves branched and rejoined and they soon lost all sense of direction.

Walking was maddening and almost impossible. They had to grope with their hands before them like blind men. Stumbling and falling against the rock, their fingers were soon throbbing and raw from brushing against the rough walls. Ulv followed the scent of the magter that hung in the air where they had passed. When it grew thin he knew they had left the frequently used tunnels and entered deserted ones. They could only retrace their steps and start again in a different direction.

More maddening than the walking was the time. Inexorably the glowing hands crept around the face of Brion’s watch until they stood at fifteen minutes before twelve.

“There is a light ahead,” Ulv whispered, and Brion almost gasped with relief. They moved slowly and silently until they stood, concealed by the darkness, looking out into a domed chamber brightly lit by glowing tubes.

“What is it,” Ulv asked, blinking in the painful wash of illumination after the long darkness.

Brion had to fight to control his voice, to stop from shouting.

“The cage with the metal webbing is a jump-space generator. The pointed, sliver shapes next to it are bombs of some kind, probably the cobalt bombs. We’ve found it!”

His first impulse was to instantly send the radio call that would stop the waiting fleet of H-bombers. But an unconvincing message would be worse than no message at all. He had to describe exactly what he saw here so the Nyjorders would know he wasn’t lying. What he told them had to fit exactly with the information they already had about the launcher and the bombs.

* * * *

The launcher had been jury-rigged from a ship's jump-space generator, that was obvious. The generator and its controls were neatly cased and mounted. Cables ran from them to a roughly constructed cage of woven metal straps, hammered and bent into shape by hand. Three technicians were working on the equipment. Brion wondered what sort of bloodthirsty war-lovers the magter had found to handle the bombing for them. Then he saw the chains around their necks and the bloody wounds on their backs. He still found it difficult to have any pity for them. They had been obviously willing to accept money to destroy another planet—or they wouldn't have been working here. They had probably rebelled only when they had discovered how suicidal the attack would be.

Thirteen minutes to midnight.

Cradling the radio against his chest, Brion rose to his feet. He had a better view of the bombs now. There were twelve of them, alike as eggs from the same deadly clutch. Pointed like the bow of a spacer, each one swept smoothly back for its two meters of length, to a sharply chopped off end. They were obviously incomplete, the war heads of rockets. One had its base turned towards him and he saw six projecting studs that could be used to attach it to the missing rocket. A circular inspection port was open in the flat base of the bomb.

This was enough. With this description the Nyjorders would know he couldn't be lying about finding the bombs. Once they realized this they couldn't destroy Dis without first trying to neutralize them.

Brion carefully counted fifty paces before he stopped. He was far enough from the cavern so he couldn't be heard, and an angle of the cave cut off all light from behind him. With carefully controlled movements he turned on the power, switched the set to transmit and checked the broadcast frequency. All correct. Then, slowly and clearly, he described what he had seen in the cavern behind him. He kept his voice emotionless, recounting facts, leaving out anything that might be considered an opinion.

It was six minutes before midnight when he finished. He thumbed the switch to receive and waited.

There was only silence.

Slowly, the empty quality of the silence penetrated his numbed mind. There were no crackling atmospherics nor hiss of static, even when he turned the power full on. The mass of rock and earth of the mountain above was acting as a perfect grounding screen, absorbing his signal even at maximum output.

They hadn't heard him. The Nyjord fleet didn't know that the cobalt bombs had been discovered before their launching. The attack

would go ahead as planned. Even now the bomb-bay doors were opening, armed H-bombs hung above the planet, held in place only by their shackles. In a few minutes the signal would be given and the shackles would spring open, the bombs drop clear….

* * * *

"Killers!" Brion shouted into the microphone. "You wouldn't listen to reason, you wouldn't listen to Hys, or me, or to any voice that suggested an alternative to complete destruction. You are going to destroy Dis and *it's not necessary*! There were a lot of ways you could have stopped it. You didn't do any of them and now it's too late. You'll destroy Dis and in turn this will destroy Nyjord. Ihjel said that and now I believe him. You're just another failure in a galaxy full of failures!"

He raised the radio above his head and sent it crashing into the rock floor. Then he was running back to Ulv, trying to run away from the realization that he, too, had tried and failed. The people on the surface of Dis had less than two minutes left to live.

"They didn't get my message," Brion said to Ulv. "The radio won't work this far underground."

"Then the bombs will fall?" Ulv asked, looking searchingly at Brion's face in the dim reflected light from the cavern.

"Unless something happens that we know nothing about, the bombs will fall."

They said nothing after that, they simply waited. The three technicians in the cavern were also aware of the time. They were calling to each other and trying to talk to the magter. The emotionless, parasite-ridden brains of the magter saw no reason to stop work, so the men were beaten back to their tasks. In spite of the blows they didn't go, just gaped in horror as the clock hands moved remorselessly towards twelve. Even the magter dimly felt some of the significance of the occasion. They stopped, too, and waited.

The hour hand touched twelve on Brion's watch, then the minute hand. The second hand closed the gap and for a tenth of a second the three black hands were one. Then the second hand moved on.

Brion's immediate sensation of relief was washed away by the chilling realization that he was deep underground. Sound and seismic waves were slow and the flare of atomic explosions couldn't be seen here. If the bombs had been dropped at twelve, they wouldn't know it at once.

A distant rumble filled the air. A moment later the ground heaved under them and the lights in the cavern flickered. Fine dust drifted

down from the roof above.

Ulv turned to him, but Brion looked away. He could not face the accusation in the Disan's eyes.

CHAPTER XVIII

One of the technicians was running and screaming. The magter knocked him down and beat him into silence. Seeing this the other two men returned to work with shaking hands. Even if all life on the surface of the planet were dead, this would have no effect on the magter. They would go ahead as planned, without emotion or imagination enough to alter their set course. As they worked the technicians' attitude changed from shocked numbness to anger. Right and wrong were forgotten. They had been killed—the invisible death of radiation must already be penetrating into the caves—but they also had the chance for vengeance. Swiftly they brought their work to completion, with a speed and precision they had concealed before.

"What are those offworlders doing?" Ulv asked.

Brion stirred from his lethargy of defeat and looked across the cavern floor. The men had a wheeled hand-truck and were rolling one of the atomic warheads onto it. They pushed it over to the latticework of the jump-field.

"They are going to bomb Nyjord now, just as Nyjord bombed Dis. That machine will hurl the bombs in a special way to the other planet."

"Will you stop them?" Ulv asked. He had his deadly blowgun in his hand and his face was an expressionless mask.

Brion almost smiled at the irony of the situation. In spite of everything he had done to prevent it, Nyjord had dropped the bombs. And this act alone may have destroyed their own planet. Brion had it within his power now to stop the launching in the cavern. Should he? Should he save the lives of his killers? Or should he practice the ancient blood-oath that had echoed and destroyed down through the ages—*An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.* It would be so simple. He literally had to do nothing. The score would be evened and his and the Disans' deaths avenged.

Did Ulv have his blowgun ready to kill Brion if he should try to stop the launchings? Or had he misread the Disan entirely?

"Will *you* stop them, Ulv?" he asked.

How large was mankind's sense of obligation? The cave man first had this feeling for his mate, then for his family. It grew until men fought and died for the abstract ideas of cities and nations, then for whole planets. Would the time ever come when men might realize that the obligation should be to the largest and most encompassing

reality of all? Mankind. And beyond that to life of all kinds.

Brion saw this idea not in words, but as a reality. When he posed the question to himself in this way he found that it stated clearly its inherent answer. He pulled his gun out, and as he did he wondered what Ulv's answer might be.

"Nyjord is *medvirk*," Ulv said, raising his blowgun and sending a dart across the cavern. It struck one of the technicians who gasped and fell to the floor.

Brion's shots crashed into the control board, shorting and destroying it, removing the menace to Nyjord for all time.

Medvirk, Ulv had said. A life form that co-operates and aids other life forms. It may kill in self-defense, but is essentially not a killer or destroyer. Ulv had a lifetime of knowledge about the interdependency of life. He grasped the essence of the idea and ignored all the verbal complications and confusions. He had killed the magter, who were his own people, because they were *umedvirk*—against life. And saved his enemies because they were *medvirk*.

With this realization came the painful knowledge that the planet and the people that had produced this understanding were dead.

* * * *

In the cavern the magter saw the destruction of their plans, and the cave mouth from which the bullets had come. Silently they rushed to kill their enemy. A concerted wave of emotionless fury.

Brion and Ulv fought back. Even the knowledge that he was doomed no matter what happened could not resign Brion to death at the hands of the magter. To Ulv, the decision was much easier. He was simply killing *umedvirk*. A believer in life, he destroyed the anti-life.

They retreated into the darkness, still firing. The magter had lights and ion-rifles, and were right behind them. Knowing the caverns better than the men they chased, pursuers circled. Brion saw lights ahead and dragged Ulv to a stop.

"They know their way through these caves, and we don't," he said. "If we try to run, they'll just shoot us down. Let's find a spot we can defend and settle into it."

"Back here," Ulv gave a tug in the right direction, "there is a cave with only one very narrow entrance."

"Let's go!"

Running as silently as they could in the darkness, they reached the deadend cavern without being seen. What noise they made was lost in other footsteps that echoed and sounded through the connecting caves. Once inside they found cover behind a ridge and

waited. The end was certain.

The magter ran swiftly into their cave, flashing his light into all the places of concealment. The beam passed over the two hidden men and at the same instant Brion fired. The shot boomed loudly as the magter fell. Even if his loss was not known, the shot would surely have been heard.

Before anyone else came into the cave, Brion ran over and grabbed the still functioning light. Propping it on the rocks so it shone on the entrance, he hurried back to shelter beside Ulv. They waited for the attack.

It was not long in coming. Two magter rushed in and died. There were more outside, and Brion wondered how long it would be before they remembered the grenades and rolled one into their shelter.

An indistinct murmur sounded outside and some sharp explosions. In their shelter, Brion and Ulv crouched low and wondered why the attack didn't come. Then one of the magter came in and Brion hesitated before shooting.

The man had *backed* in, firing behind him as he came.

Ulv had no compunctions about killing, only his darts couldn't penetrate the magter's thick clothing. As the magter turned Ulv's breath pulsed once and death stung the back of the other man's hand. He collapsed into a crumpled heap.

"Don't shoot," a voice said from outside the cave, and a man stepped through the swirling dust and smoke to stand in the beam from the light.

Brion clutched wildly at Ulv's arm, dragging the blowgun from the Disan's mouth.

The man in the light wore a protective helmet, thick boots and a pouch-hung uniform.

He was a Nyjorder.

This shock of reality was almost impossible to accept. Brion had heard the bombs fall. Yet the Nyjord soldier was here. The two facts couldn't be accepted together.

"Would you keep a hold on his arm, sir, just in case," the soldier said, glancing warily at Ulv's blowpipe. "I know what those darts can do." He pulled a microphone from one of his pockets and spoke into it.

More soldiers crowded into the cave and Professor-Commander Krafft came in behind them. He looked strangely out of place in the dusty combat uniform. The gun was even more grotesque in his blue-veined hand. After relievedly giving the pistol to the nearest soldier, he stumbled quickly over to Brion and took his hand.

"It is a profound and sincere pleasure to meet you in person," he said. "And your friend Ulv as well."

“Would you kindly explain what is going on,” Brion said thickly. He was obsessed by the strange feeling that none of this could possibly be happening.

“We will always remember you as the man who saved us from ourselves,” Krafft said, once again the professor instead of the commander.

“What he wants are facts, Grandpa, not speeches,” Hys said. The bent form of the leader of the rebel Nyjord army pushed through the crowd of taller men until he stood next to Krafft. “Simply stated, Brion, your plan succeeded. Krafft relayed your message to me—and as soon as I heard it I turned back and met him on his ship. I’m sorry that Telt’s dead—but he found what we were looking for. I couldn’t ignore his report of radioactive traces. Your girl friend arrived with the hacked up corpse at the same time I did, and we all took a long look at the green leech in its skull. Her explanation of what it is made significant sense. We were already carrying out landings when we had your call about something having been stored in the magter tower. After that it was just a matter of following tracks—and the transmitter you planted.”

“But the explosions at midnight,” Brion broke in, “I heard them!”

“You were supposed to,” Hys laughed. “Not only you, but the magter in this cave. We figured they would be armed and the cave strongly defended. So at midnight we dropped a few large chemical explosive bombs at the entrance. Enough to kill the guards without bringing the roof down. We also hoped that the magter deeper in would leave their posts or retreat from the imagined radiation. They did. Worked like a charm. We came in quietly and took them by surprise. Made a clean sweep. Killed the ones we couldn’t capture.”

“One of the renegade jump-space technicians was still alive,” Krafft said. “He told us about your stopping the bombs aimed at Nyjord, the two of you.”

* * * *

None of the Nyjorders there could add anything to his words, not even the cynical Hys. Yet Brion could empathize their feelings, the warmth of their intense relief and happiness. It was a sensation he would never forget.

“There is no more war,” Brion translated for Ulv, realizing that the Disan had understood nothing of the explanation. As he said it, he realized that there was one glaring error in the story.

“You couldn’t have done it,” Brion said, astonished. “You landed on this planet *before* you had my message about the tower. That

means you still expected the magter to be sending their bombs to Nyjord—and you made the landings in spite of this knowledge."

"Of course," Professor Krafft said, astonished at Brion's lack of understanding. "What else could we do? The magter are sick!"

Hys laughed aloud at Brion's baffled expression. "You have to understand Nyjord psychology," he said. "When it was a matter of war and killing my planet could never agree on an intelligent course. War is so alien to our philosophy that it couldn't even be considered correctly. That's the trouble with being a vegetable eater in a galaxy of carnivores. You're easy prey for the first one that lands on your back. Any other planet would have jumped on the magter with both feet and shaken the bombs out of them. We fumbled it so long it almost got both worlds killed. Your mind-parasite drew us back from the brink."

"I still don't understand," Brion said. "Why—"

"Simple matter of definition. Before you came we had no way to deal with the magter here on Dis. They really were alien to us. Nothing they did made sense—and nothing we did seemed to have the slightest effect on them. But you discovered that they were *sick*, and that's something we know how to handle. We're united again, my rebel army was instantly absorbed into the rest of the Nyjord forces by mutual agreement. Doctors and nurses are on the way here now. Plans were put under way to evacuate what part of the population we could until the bombs were found. The planet is united again and working hard."

"Because the magter are sick, infected by a destructive life form?" Brion asked.

"Exactly so," Professor Krafft said. "We are civilized, after all. You can't expect us to fight a war—and you surely can't expect us to ignore the plight of sick neighbors?"

"No…you surely can't," Brion said, sitting down heavily. He looked at Ulv, who knew nothing of the incomprehensible speech. Beyond him Hys wore his most cynical expression as he considered the frailties of his people.

"Hys," Brion called out. "You translate all that into Disan and explain to Ulv. I wouldn't dare."

CHAPTER XIX

Dis was a floating golden ball, looking like a schoolroom globe in space. No clouds obscured its surface, and from this distance it seemed warm and attractive set against the cold darkness. Brion almost wished he were back there now, as he sat shivering inside the heavy coat. He wondered how long it would be before his confused body-

temperature controls decided to turn off the summer adjustment.

Delicate as a dream, Lea's reflection swam in space next to the planet. She had come up quietly behind him in the spaceship's corridor, only her gentle breath and mirrored face telling him she was there. He turned quickly and took her hands in his.

"You're looking better," he said.

"Well I should," she said, pushing her hair in an unconscious gesture with the back of her hand. "I've been doing nothing but lie in the ship's hospital, while you were having such a fine time this last week. Rushing around down there shooting all the magter."

"Just gassing them," he told her. "The Nyjorders can't bring themselves to kill any more, even if it does raise their own casualty rate. In fact they are having difficulty restraining the Disans led by Ulv, who are happily killing any magter they see as being pure *umedvirk*."

"What will they do when they have all those frothing magter madmen?"

"They don't know yet," he said. "They won't really know until they see what an adult magter is like with his brain-parasite dead and gone. They're having better luck with the children. If they catch them early enough, the parasite can be destroyed before it has done too much damage."

Lea shuddered delicately.

"I hate to think of a magter deprived of his symbiote," she said. "If his system can stand the shock, I imagine there will be nothing left except a brainless hulk. This is one series of experiments I don't care to witness. I rest secure in the knowledge that the Nyjorders will find the most humane solution."

"I'm sure they will," Brion said.

"Now what about us," she said disconcertingly.

This jarred Brion. He didn't have her ability to put past horrors out of the mind by substituting present pleasures. "Well, what about us?" he said with masterful inappropriateness.

She smiled and leaned against him. "You weren't as vague as that, the night in the hospital room. I seem to remember a few other things you said. You can't claim you're completely indifferent to me, Brion Brandd. So I'm only asking you what any outspoken Anvharian girl would. Where do we go from here? Get married?"

There was a definite pleasure in holding her slight body in his arms and feeling her hair against his cheek. They both sensed it, and this awareness made his words sound that much more ugly.

"Lea…darling! You know how important you are to me—but you certainly realize that we could never get married."

Her body stiffened and she tore herself away from him.

“Why you great, fat, egotistical slab of meat,” she screamed. “What do you mean by that? I like you Lea, we have plenty of fun and games together, but surely you realize that you aren’t the kind of girl one takes home to mother!”

“Lea, hold on,” he said. “You know better than to say a thing like that. What I said has nothing to do with how I feel towards you. But marriage means children, and you are biologist enough to know about Earth’s genes—”

“Intolerant yokel!” she cried, slapping his face. He didn’t move or attempt to stop her. “I expected better from you, with all your pretensions of understanding. But all you can think of are the horror stories about the worn out genes of Earth. You’re the same as every other big, strapping bigot from the frontier planets. I know how you look down on our small size, our allergies and hemophilia and all the other weaknesses that have been bred back and preserved by the race. You hate—”

“But that’s not what I meant at all,” he interrupted, shocked, his voice drowning hers out. “Yours are the strong genes, the viable strains—*mine* are the deadly ones. A child of mine would kill itself and you in a natural birth, if it managed to live to term. You’re forgetting that you are the original Homo sapiens. I’m a recent mutation.”

Lea was frozen by his words. They revealed a truth she had known, but would never permit herself to consider.

“Earth is home, the planet where mankind developed,” he said. “The last few thousand years you may have been breeding weaknesses back into the genetic pool. But that’s nothing compared to the hundred millions of years that it took to develop man. How many newborn babies live to be a year of age on Earth?”

“Why…almost all of them.”

“Earth is home,” he said gently. “When men leave home they can adapt to different planets, but a price must be paid. A terrible price in dead infants. The successful mutations live, the failures die. Natural selection is a brutally simple affair. When you look at me you see a success. I have a sister—a success too. Yet my mother had six other children who died when they were still babies. And at least fifteen others that never came to term. You know these things, don’t you Lea?”

“I know, I know….” she said sobbing into her hands. He held her now and she didn’t pull away. “I know it all as a biologist—but I am so awfully tired of being a biologist, and top of my class and a mental match for any man. But when I think about you, I do it as a woman, and can’t admit any of this. I need someone Brion, and I needed you so much because I loved you.” She sniffed and pushed at her eyes. “You’re going home, aren’t you? Back to Anvhar. When?”

"I can't wait too long," he said, unhappily. "Aside from my personal wants I find myself remembering that I'm a part of Anvhar. When you think of the number of people who suffered and died—or adapted—so that I could be sitting here now. Well, it's a little frightening. I suppose it doesn't make sense logically that I should feel indebted to them. But I do. Whatever I do now, or in the next few years, won't be as important as getting back to Anvhar."

"And I won't be going back with you." It was a flat statement the way she said it, not a question.

"No, you won't be," he said.

Lea was looking out of the port at Dis and her eyes were dry now. "Way back in my deeply buried unconscious I think I knew it would end this way," she said. "If you think your little lecture on the Origins of Man was a novelty, it wasn't. Just reminded me of a number of things my glands had convinced me to forget. In a way I envy you your weightlifter wife-to-be, and your happy kiddies. But not very much. Very early in life I resigned myself to the fact that there was no one on Earth I would care to marry. I always had these teen-age dreams of a hero from space who would carry me off, and I guess I slipped you into the pattern without realizing it."

* * * *

"Don't we look happy," Hys said, shambling towards them.

"Fall dead and make me even happier then," Lea snapped bitterly.

Hys ignored the acid tone of her answer and sat down on the couch next to them. Since leaving command of his rebel Nyjord Army he seemed much mellower. "Going to keep on working for the Cultural Relationships Foundation, Brion?" he asked. "You're the kind of man we need."

Brion's eyes widened as the meaning of the last words penetrated. "Are you in the C.R.F.?"

"Field agent for Nyjord," he said. "I hope you don't think those helpless office types like Faussel or Mervv really represented us there? They just took notes and acted as a front and cover for the organization. Nyjord is a fine planet, but a gentle guiding hand behind the scenes is needed, to help them find their place in the galaxy before they are pulverized."

"What's your dirty game, Hys?" Lea asked, scowling. "I've had enough hints to suspect for a long time that there was more to the C.R.F. than the sweetness-and-light-part I have seen. Are you people egomaniacs, power hungry or what?"

"That's the first charge that would be leveled at us, if our

activities were publicly known," Hys told her. "That's why we do most of our work under cover. The best fact I can give you to counter the charge is *money*. Just where do you think we get the funds for an operation this size?" He smiled at their blank looks. "You'll see the records later so there won't be any doubt. The truth is that all our funds are donated by planets we have helped. Even a tiny percentage of a planetary income is large—add enough of them together and you have enough money to help other planets. And voluntary gratitude is a perfect test, if you stop to think about it. You can't talk people into liking what you have done. They have to be convinced. There have always been people on C.R.F. worlds who knew about our work, and agreed with it enough to see that we are kept in funds."

"Why are you telling me all this super-secret stuff," Lea asked.

"Isn't that obvious? We want you to keep on working for us. You can name whatever salary you like, as I've said there is no shortage of ready cash." Hys glanced quickly at them both and delivered the clinching argument. "I hope Brion will go on working with us, too. He is the kind of field agent we desperately need, and it is almost impossible to find."

"Just show me where to sign," she said, and there was life in her voice once again.

"I wouldn't exactly call it blackmail," Brion smiled, "yet I suppose if you people can juggle planetary psychologies, you must find that individuals can be pushed around like chess men. Though you should realize that very little pushing is required this time."

"Will you sign on?" Hys asked.

"I must go back to Anvhar," Brion said, "but there really is no pressing hurry."

"Earth," said Lea, "is overpopulated enough as it is."

ANGEL'S EGG, by Edgar Pangborn

LETTER OF RECORD, BLAINE TO McCARRAN, DATED AUGUST 10, 1951.

Mr. Cleveland McCarran
Federal Bureau of Investigation
Washington, D.C.

Dear Sir:

In compliance with your request I enclose herewith a transcript of the pertinent sections of the journal of Dr. David Bannerman, deceased. The original document is being held at this office until proper disposition can be determined.

Our investigation has shown no connection between Dr. Bannerman and any organization, subversive or otherwise. So far as we can learn, he was exactly what he seemed, an inoffensive summer resident, retired, with a small independent income—a recluse to some extent, but well spoken of by local tradesmen and other neighbors. A connection between Dr. Bannerman and the type of activity that concerns your Department would seem most unlikely.

The following information is summarized from the earlier parts of Dr. Bannerman's journal, and tallies with the results of our own limited inquiry. He was born in 1898 at Springfield, Massachusetts, attended public school there, and was graduated from Harvard College in 1922, his studies having been interrupted by two years' military service. He was wounded in action in Argonne, receiving a spinal injury. He earned a doctorate in biology in 1926. Delayed aftereffects of his war injury necessitated hospitalization, 1927-28. From 1929 to 1948 he taught elementary sciences in a private school in Boston. He published two textbooks in introductory biology, 1929 and 1937. In 1948 he retired from teaching: a pension and a modest income from textbook royalties evidently made this possible. Aside from the spinal deformity, which caused him to walk with a stoop, his health is said to have been fair. Autopsy findings suggested that the spinal condition must have given him considerable pain; he is not known to have mentioned this to anyone, not even to his physician, Dr. Lester Morse. There is no evidence whatever of drug addiction or alcoholism.

At one point early in his journal Dr. Bannerman describes himself as "a naturalist of the puttering type—I would rather sit on a log than write monographs: it pays off better." Dr. Morse, and others who knew Dr. Bannerman personally, tell me that this conveys a hint of his personality.

I am not qualified to comment on the material of this journal,

except to say I have no evidence to support (or to contradict) Dr. Bannerman's statements. The journal has been studied only by my immediate superiors, by Dr. Morse, and by myself. I take it for granted you will hold the matter in strictest confidence.

With the journal I am also enclosing a statement by Dr. Morse, written at my request for our records and for your information. You will note that he says, with some qualifications, that "death was not inconsistent with an embolism." He has signed a death certificate on that basis. You will recall from my letter of August 5 that it was Dr. Morse who discovered Dr. Bannerman's body. Because he was a close personal friend of the deceased, Dr. Morse did not feel able to perform the autopsy himself. It was done by a Dr. Stephen Clyde of this city, and was virtually negative as regards cause of death, neither confirming nor contradicting Dr. Morse's original tentative diagnosis. If you wish to read the autopsy report in full I shall be glad to forward a copy.

Dr. Morse tells me that so far as he knows Dr. Bannerman had no near relatives. He never married. For the last twelve summers he occupied a small cottage on a back road about twenty-five miles from this city, and had few visitors. The neighbor, Steele, mentioned in the journal is a farmer, age 68, of good character, who tells me he "never got really acquainted with Dr. Bannerman."

At this office we feel that unless new information comes to light, further active investigation is hardly justified.

Respectfully yours,
Garrison Blame
Capt., State Police
Augusta, Me.

Encl: *Extract from Journal of David Bannerman, dec'd. Statement by Lester Morse, M.D.*

* * * *

LIBRARIAN'S NOTE: The following document, originally attached as an unofficial "rider" to the foregoing letter, was donated to this institution in 1994 through the courtesy of Mrs. Helen McCarran, widow of the martyred first President of the World Federation. Other personal and state papers of President McCarran, many of them dating from the early period when he was employed by the FBI, are accessible to public view at the Institute of World History, Copenhagen.

PERSONAL NOTE, BLAINE TO McCARRAN, DATED AUGUST

10, 1951

Dear Cleve:

Guess I didn't make it clear in my other letter that that bastard Clyde was responsible for my having to drag you into this. He is something to handle with tongs.

Happened thusly—

When he came in to heave the autopsy report at me, he was already having pups just because it was so completely negative (he does have certain types of honesty), and he caught sight of a page or two of the journal on my desk. Doc Morse was with me at the time. I fear we both got upstage with him (Clyde has that effect, and we were both in a State of Mind anyway), so right away the old drip thinks he smells something subversive. Belongs to the atomize-'em-NOW-WOW-WOW school of thought—'nuf sed? He went into a grand whuff-whuff about referring to Higher Authority, and I knew that meant your hive, so I wanted to get ahead of the letter I knew he'd write. I suppose his literary effort couldn't be just sort of quietly transferred to File 13, otherwise known as the Appropriate Receptacle?

He can say what he likes about my character, if any, but even I never supposed he'd take a sideswipe at his professional colleague. Doc Morse is the best of the best and I would not dream of suppressing any evidence important to us, as you say Clyde's letter hints. What Doc did do was to tell Clyde, pleasantly, in the privacy of my office, to go take a flying this-and-that at the moon. I only wish I'd thought of the expression myself. So Clyde rushes off to tell teacher. See what I mean about the tongs? However (knock on wood) I don't think Clyde saw enough of the journal to get any notion of what it's all about.

As for that journal, damn it, Cleve, I don't know. If you

have any ideas I want them, of course. I'm afraid I believe

in angels, myself. But when I think of the effect on local opinion if the story ever gets out—brother! Here was this old Bannerman living alone with a female angel and they wuzn't even common-law married. Aw, gee… And the flood of phone calls from other crackpots anxious to explain it all to me. Experts in the care and feeding of angels. Methods of angel-proofing. Angels right outside the window a minute ago. Make Angels a Profitable Enterprise in Your Spare Time!!!

When do I see you? You said you might have a week clear in October. If we could get together maybe we could make sense where there is none. I hear the cider promises to be good this year. Try and make it. My best to Ginny and the other young fry, and Helen of course.

Respeckfully yourn,

Garry

P.S. If you do see any angels down your way, and they aren't willing to wait for a Republican Administration, by all means have them investigated by the Senate—then we'll know we're all nuts.

G.

* * * *

EXTRACT FROM JOURNAL OF DAVID BANNERMAN, JUNE 1-JULY 29, 1951

June 1

It must have been at least three weeks ago when we had that flying saucer flurry. Observers the other side of Katahdin saw it come down this side; observers this side saw it come down the other. Size anywhere from six inches to sixty feet in diameter (or was it cigar-shaped?) and speed whatever you please. Seem to recall that witnesses agreed on a rosy-pink light. There was the inevitable gobbledegookery of official explanation designed to leave everyone impressed, soothed, and disappointed. I paid scant attention to the excitement and less to the explanations—naturally, I thought it was just a flying saucer. But now Camilla has hatched out an angel.

It would have to be Camilla. Perhaps I haven't mentioned my hens enough. In the last day or two it has dawned on me that this journal may be of importance to other eyes than mine, not merely a lonely man's plaything to blunt the edge of mortality: an angel in the house makes a difference. I had better show consideration for possible readers.

I have eight hens, all yearlings except Camilla: this is her third spring. I boarded her two winters at my neighbor Steele's farm when I closed this shack and shuffled my chilly bones off to Florida, because even as a pullet she had a manner which overbore me. I could never have eaten Camilla: if she had looked at the ax with that same expression of rancid disapproval (and she would), I should have felt I was beheading a favorite aunt. Her only concession to sentiment is the annual rush of maternity to the brain—normal, for a case-hardened White Plymouth Rock.

This year she stole a nest successfully in a tangle of blackberry. By the time I located it, I estimated I was about two weeks too late. I had to outwit her by watching from a window—she is far too acute to be openly trailed from feeding ground to nest. When I had bled and pruned my way to her hideout she was sitting on nine eggs and hating my guts. They could not be fertile, since I keep no rooster, and I was about to rob her when I saw the ninth egg was nothing of hers. It was

a deep blue and transparent, with flecks of inner light that made me think of the first stars in a clear evening. It was the same size as Camilla's own. There was an embryo, but I could make nothing of it. I returned the egg to Camilla's bare and fevered breastbone and went back to the house for a long, cool drink.

That was ten days ago. I know I ought to have kept a record; I examined the blue egg every day, watching how some nameless life grew within it. The angel has been out of the shell three days now. This is the first time I have felt equal to facing pen and ink.

I have been experiencing a sort of mental lassitude unfamiliar to me. Wrong word: not so much lassitude as a preoccupation, with no sure clue to what it is that preoccupies me. By reputation I am a scientist of sorts. Right now I have no impulse to look for data; I want to sit quiet and let truth come to a relaxed mind if it will. Could be merely a part of growing older, but I doubt that. The broken pieces of the wonderful blue shell are on my desk. I have been peering at them —into them—for the last ten minutes or more. Can't call it study: my thought wanders into their blue, learning nothing I can retain in words. It does not convey much to say I have gone into a vision of open sky—and of peace, if such a thing there be.

The angel chipped the shell deftly in two parts. This was evidently done with the aid of small horny outgrowths on her elbows; these growths were sloughed off on the second day. I wish I had seen her break the shell, but when I visited the blackberry tangle three days ago she was already out. She poked her exquisite head through Camilla's neck feathers, smiled sleepily, and snuggled back into darkness to finish drying off. So what could I do, more than save the broken shell and wriggle my clumsy self out of there? I had removed Camilla's own eggs the day before—Camilla was only moderately annoyed. I was nervous about disposing of them, even though they were obviously Camilla's, but no harm was done. I cracked each one to be sure. Very frankly rotten eggs and nothing more.

In the evening of that day I thought of rats and weasels, as I should have done earlier. I prepared a box in the kitchen and brought the two in, the angel quiet in my closed hand. They are there now. I think they are comfortable.

Three days after hatching, the angel is the length of my forefinger, say three inches tall, with about the relative proportions of a six-year-old girl. Except for head, hands, and probably the soles of her feet, she is clothed in down the color of ivory; what can be seen of her skin is a glowing pink—I do mean glowing, like the inside of certain sea shells. Just above the small of her back are two stubs which I take to be infantile wings. They do not suggest an extra pair of specialized forelimbs. I think they are wholly differentiated organs;

perhaps they will be like the wings of an insect. Somehow, I never thought of angels buzzing. Maybe she won't. I know very little about angels. At present the stubs are covered with some dull tissue, no doubt a protective sheath to be discarded when the membranes (if they are membranes) are ready to grow. Between the stubs is a not very prominent ridge—special musculature, I suppose. Otherwise her shape is quite human, even to a pair of minuscule mammalian buttons just visible under the down; how that can make sense in an egg-laying organism is beyond my comprehension. (Just for the record, so is a Corot landscape; so is Schubert's Unfinished; so is the flight of a hummingbird, or the other-world of frost on a window pane.) The down on her head has grown visibly in three days and is of different quality from the body down—later it may resemble human hair, as a diamond resembles a chunk of granite…

A curious thing has happened. I went to Camilla's box after writing that. Judy[1] was already lying in front of it, unexcited. The angel's head was out from under the feathers, and I thought—with more verbal distinctness than such thoughts commonly take, "So here I am, a naturalist of middle years and cold sober, observing a three-inch oviparous mammal with down and wings." The thing is—she giggled. Now, it might have been only amusement at my appearance, which to her must be enormously gross and comic. But another thought formed unspoken: "I am no longer lonely." And her face (hardly bigger than a dime) immediately changed from laughter to a brooding and friendly thoughtfulness.

Judy and Camilla are old friends. Judy seems untroubled by the angel. I have no worries about leaving them alone together. I must sleep.

* * * *

June 3

I made no entry last night. The angel was talking to me, and when that was finished I drowsed off immediately on a cot that I have moved into the kitchen so as to be near them.

I had never been strongly impressed by the evidence for extrasensory perception. It is fortunate my mind was able to accept the novelty, since to the angel it is clearly a matter of course. Her tiny mouth is most expressive but moves only for that reason and for eating—not for speech. Probably she could speak to her own kind if she wished, but I dare say the sound would be outside the range of my hearing as well as of my understanding.

Last night after I brought the cot in and was about to finish my

puttering bachelor supper, she climbed to the edge of the box and pointed, first at herself and then at the top of the kitchen table. Afraid to let my vast hand take hold of her, I held it out flat and she sat in my palm. Camilla was inclined to fuss, but the angel looked over her shoulder and Camilla subsided, watchful but no longer alarmed.

The table top is porcelain, and the angel shivered. I folded a towel and spread a silk handkerchief on top of that; the angel sat on this arrangement with apparent comfort, near my face. I was not even bewildered. Possibly she had already instructed me to blank out my mind. At any rate, I did so, without conscious effort to that end.

She reached me first with visual imagery. How can I make it plain that this had nothing in common with my sleeping dreams? There was no weight of symbolism from my littered past; no discoverable connection with any of yesterday's commonplaces; indeed, no actual involvement of my personality at all. I saw. I was moving vision, though without eyes or other flesh. And while my mind saw, it also knew where my flesh was, slumped at the kitchen table. If anyone had entered the kitchen, if there had been a noise of alarm out in the henhouse, I should have known it.

There was a valley such as I have not seen (and never will) on Earth. I have seen many beautiful places on this planet—some of them were even tranquil. Once I took a slow steamer to New Zealand and had the Pacific as a plaything for many days. I can hardly say how I knew this was not Earth. The grass of the valley was an earthly green; a river below me was a blue-and-silver thread under familiar-seeming sunlight; there were trees much like pine and maple, and maybe that is what they were. But it was not Earth. I was aware of mountains heaped to strange heights on either side of the valley—snow, rose, amber, gold. Perhaps the amber tint was unlike any mountain color I have noticed in this world at midday.

Or I may have known it was not Earth simply because her mind—dwelling within some unimaginable brain smaller than the tip of my little finger—told me so.

I watched two inhabitants of that world come flying, to rest in the field of sunny grass where my bodiless vision had brought me. Adult forms, such as my angel would surely be when she had her growth, except that both of these were male and one of them was dark-skinned. The latter was also old, with a thousand-wrinkled face, knowing and full of tranquility; the other was flushed and lively with youth; both were beautiful. The down of the brown-skinned old one was reddish-tawny; the other's was ivory with hints of orange. Their wings were true membranes, with more variety of subtle iridescence than I have seen even in the wing of a dragonfly; I could not say that any color was dominant, for each motion brought a ripple of change.

These two sat at their ease on the grass. I realized that they were talking to each other, though their lips did not move in speech more than once or twice. They would nod, smile, now and then illustrate something with twinkling hands.

A huge rabbit lolloped past them. I knew (thanks to my own angel's efforts, I suppose) that this animal was of the same size of our common wild ones. Later, a blue-green snake three times the size of the angels came flowing through the grass; the old one reached out to stroke its head carelessly, and I think he did it without interrupting whatever he was saying.

Another creature came, in leisured leaps. He was monstrous, yet I felt no alarm in the angels or in myself. Imagine a being built somewhat like a kangaroo up to the head, about eight feet tall, and katydid-green. Really, the thick balancing tail and enormous legs were the only kangaroo-like features about him: the body above the massive thighs was not dwarfed but thick and square; the arms and hands were quite humanoid: the head was round, manlike except for its face—there was only a single nostril and his mouth was set in the vertical; the eyes were large and mild. I received an impression of high intelligence and natural gentleness. In one of his manlike hands two tools so familiar and ordinary that I knew my body by the kitchen table had laughed in startled recognition. But, after all, a garden spade and rake are basic. Once invented—I expect we did it ourselves in the Neolithic Age—there is little reason why they should change much down the millennia.

This farmer halted by the angels, and the three conversed a while. The big head nodded agreeably. I believe the young angel made a joke; certainly the convulsions in the huge green face made me think of laughter. Then this amiable monster turned up the grass in a patch a few yards square, broke the sod and raked the surface smooth, just as any competent gardener might do—except that he moved with the relaxed smoothness of a being whose strength far exceeds the requirements of his task…

I was back in my kitchen with everyday eyes. My angel was exploring the table. I had a loaf of bread there and a dish of strawberries and cream. She was trying a bread crumb; seemed to like it fairly well. I offered the strawberries; she broke off one of the seeds and nibbled it but didn't care so much for the pulp. I held up the great spoon with sugary cream; she steadied it with both hands to try some. I think she liked it. It had been most stupid of me not to realize that she would be hungry. I brought wine from the cupboard; she watched inquiringly, so I put a couple of drops on the handle of a spoon. This really pleased her: she chuckled and patted her tiny stomach, though I'm afraid it wasn't awfully good sherry. I brought some crumbs of

cake, but she indicated that she was full, came close to my face, and motioned me to lower my head.

She reached towards me until she could press both hands against my forehead—I felt it only enough to know her hands were there—and she stood so a long time, trying to tell me something.

It was difficult. Pictures come through with relative ease, but now she was transmitting an abstraction of a complex kind: my clumsy brain really suffered in the effort to receive. Something did come across. I have only the crudest way of passing it on. Imagine an equilateral triangle; place the following words one at each corner —"recruiting," "collecting," "saving." The meaning she wanted to convey ought to be near the center of the triangle.

I had also the sense that her message provided a partial explanation Of her errand in this lovable and damnable world.

She looked weary when she stood away from me. I put out my palm and she climbed into it, to be carried back to the nest.

She did not talk to me tonight, nor eat, but she gave a reason, coming out from Camilla's feathers long enough to turn her back and show me the wing stubs. The protective sheaths have dropped off; the wings are rapidly growing. They are probably damp and weak. She was quite tired and went back into the warm darkness almost at once.

Camilla must be exhausted, too. I don't think she has been off the nest more than twice since I brought them into the house.

* * * *

June 4

Today she can fly.

I learned it in the afternoon, when I was fiddling about in the garden and Judy was loafing in the sunshine she loves. Something apart from sight and sound called me to hurry back to the house. I saw my angel through the screen door before I opened it. One of her feet had caught in a hideous loop of loose wire at a break in the mesh. Her first tug of alarm must have tightened the loop so that her hands were not strong enough to force it open.

Fortunately I was able to cut the wire with a pair of shears before I lost my head; then she could free her foot without injury. Camilla had been frantic, rushing around fluffed up, but—here's an odd thing —perfectly silent. None of the recognized chicken noises of dismay: if an ordinary chick had been in trouble she would have raised the roof.

The angel flew to me and hovered, pressing her hands on my forehead. The message was clear at once: "No harm done." She flew down to tell Camilla the same thing.

Yes, in the same way. I saw Camilla standing near my feet with her neck out and head low, and the angel put a hand on either side of her scraggy comb. Camilla relaxed, clucked in the normal way, and spread her wings for a shelter. The angel went under it, but only to oblige Camilla, I think—at least, she stuck her head through the wing feathers and winked.

She must have seen something else, then, for she came out and flew back to me and touched a finger to my cheek, looked at the finger, saw it was wet, put it in her mouth, made a face, and laughed at me.

We went outdoors into the sun (Camilla, too), and the angel gave me an exhibition of what flying ought to be. Not even Schubert can speak of joy as her first free flying did. At one moment she would be hanging in front of my eyes, radiant and delighted; the next instant she would be a dot of color against a cloud. Try to imagine something that would make a hummingbird seem a bit dull and sluggish.

They do hum. Softer than a hummingbird, louder than a dragonfly.

Something like the sound of hawk-moths—*Heinmaris thisbe,* for instance: the one I used to call Hummingbird Moth when I was a child.

I was frightened, naturally. Frightened first at what might happen to her, but that was unnecessary; I don't think she would be in danger from any savage animal except possibly Man. I saw a Cooper's hawk slant down the visible ray toward the swirl of color where she was dancing by herself; presently she was drawing iridescent rings around him; then, while he soared in smaller circles, I could not see her, but (maybe she felt my fright) she was again in front of me, pressing my forehead in the now familiar way. I knew she was amused and caught the idea that the hawk was a "lazy character." Not quite the way I'd describe *Accipiter cooperi,* but it's all in the point of view. I believe she had been riding his back, no doubt with her speaking hands on his terrible head.

And later I was frightened by the thought that she might not want to return to me. Can I compete with sunlight and open sky? The passage of that terror through me brought her back swiftly, and her hands said with great clarity: "Don't ever be afraid of anything—it isn't necessary for you."

Once this afternoon I was saddened by the realization that old Judy can take little part in what goes on now. I can well remember Judy running like the wind. The angel must have heard this thought in me, for she stood a long time beside Judy's drowsy head, while Judy's tail thumped cheerfully on the warm grass.

In the evening the angel made a heavy meal on two or three cake

crumbs and another drop of sherry, and we had what was almost a sustained conversation. I will write it in that form this time, rather than grope for anything more exact. I asked her, “How far away is your home?”

“My home is here.”

“Thank God!—but I meant, the place your people came from.”

“Ten 1ight-years.”

“The images you showed me—that quiet valley—that is ten light-years away?”

“Yes. But that was my father talking to you, through me. He was grown when the journey began. He is two hundred and forty years old—our years, thirty-two days longer than yours.”

Mainly I was conscious of a flood of relief: I had feared, on the basis of terrestrial biology, that her explosively rapid growth after hatching must foretell a brief life. But it’s all right—she can outlive me, and by a few hundred years, at that. “Your father is here now, on this planet—shall I see him?”

She took her hands away—listening, I believe. The answer was: “No. He is sorry. He is ill and cannot live long. I am to see him in a few days, when I fly a little better. He taught me for twenty years after I was born.”

“I don’t understand. I thought—”

“Later, friend. My father is grateful for your kindness to me.”

I don’t know what I thought about that. I felt no faintest trace of condescension in the message. “And he was showing me things he had seen with his own eyes, ten light-years away?”

“Yes.” Then she wanted me to rest a while; I am sure she knows what a huge effort it is for my primitive brain to function in this way. But before she ended the conversation by humming down to her nest she gave me this, and I received it with such clarity that I cannot be mistaken: “He says that only fifty million years ago it was a jungle there, just as Terra is now.”

* * * *

June 8

When I woke four days ago the angel was having breakfast, and little Camilla was dead. The angel watched me rub sleep out of my eyes, watched me discover Camilla, and then flew to me. I received this: “Does it make, you unhappy?”

“I don’t know exactly.” You can get fond of a hen, especially a cantankerous and homely old one whose personality has a lot in common with your own.

“She was old. She wanted a flock of chicks, and I couldn’t stay with her. So I—” Something obscure here: probably my mind was trying too hard to grasp it— “…so I saved her life.” I could make nothing else out of it. She said “saved.”

Camilla’s death looked natural, except that I should have expected the death contractions to muss the straw, and that hadn’t happened. Maybe the angel had arranged the old lady’s body for decorum, though I don’t see how her muscular strength would have been equal to it—Camilla weighed at least seven pounds.

As I was burying her at the edge of the garden and the angel was humming over my head, I recalled a thing which, when it happened, I had dismissed as a dream. Merely a moonlight image of the angel standing in the nest box with her hands on Camilla’s head, then pressing her mouth gently on Camilla’s throat, just before the hen’s head sank down out of my line of vision. Probably I actually waked and saw it happen. I am somehow unconcerned—even, as I think more about it, pleased…

After the burial the angel’s hands said, “Sit on the grass and we’ll talk…. Question me. I’ll tell you what I can. My father asks you to write it down.”

So that is what we have been doing for the last four days. I have been going to school, a slow but willing pupil. Rather than enter anything in this journal (for in the evenings I was exhausted), I made notes as best I could. The angel has gone now to see her father and will not return until morning. I shall try to make a readable version of my notes.

Since she had invited questions, I began with something which had been bothering me, as a would-be naturalist, exceedingly. I couldn’t see how creatures no larger than the adults I had observed could lay eggs as large as Camilla’s. Nor could I understand why, if they were hatched in an almost adult condition and able to eat a varied diet, she had any use for that ridiculous, lovely, and apparently functional pair of breasts. When the angel grasped my difficulty she exploded with laughter—her kind, which buzzed her all over the garden ad caused her to fluff my hair on the wing and pinch my ear lobe. She lit on a rhubarb leaf and gave a delectably naughty representation of herself as a hen laying an egg, including the cackle. She got me to bumbling helplessly—my kind of laughter—and it was some time before we could quiet down. Then she did her best to explain.

They are true mammals, and the young—not more than two or at most three in a lifetime averaging two hundred and fifty years—are delivered in very much the human way. The baby is nursed—human fashion—until his brain begins to respond a little to their unspoken

language; that takes three to four weeks. Then he is placed in an altogether different medium. She could not describe that clearly, because there was very little in my educational storehouse to help me grasp it. It is some gaseous medium that arrests bodily growth for an almost indefinite period, while mental growth continues. It took them, she says, about seven thousand years to perfect this technique after they first hit on the idea: they are never in a hurry. The infant remains under this delicate and precise control for anywhere from fifteen to thirty years, the period depending not only on his mental vigor but also on the type of lifework he tentatively elects as soon as his brain is knowing enough to make a choice. During this period his mind is guided with unwavering patience by teachers who—

It seems those teachers know their business. This was peculiarly difficult for me to assimilate, although the fact came through clearly enough. In their world, the profession of teacher is more highly honored than any other—can such a thing be possible?—and so difficult to enter that only the strongest minds dare attempt it. (I had to rest a while after absorbing that.) An aspirant must spend fifty years (not including the period of infantile education) in merely getting ready to begin, and the acquisition of factual knowledge, while not understressed, takes only a small portion of those fifty years. Then —if he's good enough—he can take a small part in the elementary instruction of a few babies, and if he does well on that basis for another thirty or forty years, he is considered a fair beginner… Once upon a time I lurched around stuffy classrooms trying to insert a few predigested facts (I wonder how many of them were facts?) into the minds of bored and preoccupied adolescents, some of whom may have liked me moderately well. I was even able to shake hands and be nice while their terribly well-meaning parents explained to me how they ought to be educated. So much of our human effort goes down the drain of futility, I sometimes wonder how we ever got as far as the Bronze Age. Somehow we did, though, and a short way beyond.

After that preliminary stage of an angel's education is finished, the baby is transferred to more ordinary surroundings, and his bodily growth completes itself in a very short time. Wings grow abruptly (as I have seen), and he reaches a maximum height of six inches (our measure). Only then does he enter on that lifetime of two hundred and fifty years, for not until then does his body begin to age. My angel has been a living personality for many years but will not celebrate her first birthday for almost a year. I like to think of that.

At about the same time that they learned the principles of interplanetary travel (approximately twelve million years ago) these people also learned how, by use of a slightly different method, growth could be arrested at any point short of full maturity. At first the

knowledge served no purpose except in the control of illnesses which still occasionally struck them at that time. But when the long periods of time required for space travel were considered, the advantages became obvious.

So it happens that my angel was born ten light-years away. She was trained by her father and many others in the wisdom of seventy million years (that, she tells me, is the approximate sum of their recorded history), and then she was safely sealed and cherished in what my superamoebic brain regarded as a blue egg. Education did not proceed at that time; her mind went to sleep with the rest of her. When Camilla's temperature made her wake and grow again, she remembered what to do with the little horny bumps provided for her elbows. And came out—into this planet, God help her.

I wondered why her father should have chosen any combination so unreliable as an old hen and a human being. Surely he must have had plenty of excellent ways to bring the shell to the right temperature. Her answer should have satisfied me immensely, but I am still compelled to wonder about it. "Camilla was a nice hen, and my father studied your mind while you were asleep. It was a bad landing, and much was broken—no such landing was ever made before after so long a journey: forty years. Only four other grownups could come with my father. Three of them died en route and he is very ill. And there were nine other children to care for."

Yes, I knew she'd said that an angel thought I was good enough to be trusted with his daughter. If it upsets me, all I need do is look at her and then in the mirror. As for the explanation, I can only conclude there must be more that I am not ready to understand. I was worried about those nine others, but she assured me they were all well, and I sensed that I ought not to ask more about them at present…

Their planet, she says, is closely similar to this. A trifle larger, moving in a somewhat longer orbit around a sun like ours. Two gleaming moons, smaller than ours—their orbits are such that two-moon nights come rarely. They are magic, and she will ask her father to show me one, if he can. Their year is thirty-two days longer than ours; because of a slower rotation, their day has twenty-six of our hours. Their atmosphere is mainly nitrogen and oxygen in the proportions familiar to us; slightly richer in some of the rare gases. The climate is now what we should call tropical and subtropical, but they have known glacial rigors like those in our world's past. There are only two great continental land masses, and many thousands of large islands. Their total population is only five billion.

Most of the forms of life we know have parallels there—some quite exact parallels: rabbits, deer, mice, cats. The cats have been bred to an even higher intelligence than they possess on our Earth; it is

possible, she says, to have a good deal of intellectual intercourse with their cats, who learned several million years ago that when they kill, it must be done with lightning precision and without torture. The cats had some difficulty grasping the possibility of pain in other organisms, but once that educational hurdle was passed, development was easy. Nowadays many of the cats are popular storytellers; about forty million years ago they were still occasionally needed as a special police force, and served the angels with real heroism.

It seems my angel wants to become a student of animal life here on Earth. I, a teacher!—but bless her heart for the notion, anyhow. We sat and traded animals for a couple of hours last night. I found it restful, after the mental struggle to grasp more difficult matters. Judy was something new to her. They have several luscious monsters on that planet but, in her view, so have we. She told me of a blue sea snake fifty feet long (relatively harmless) that bellows cow-like and comes into the tidal marshes to lay black eggs; so I gave her a whale. She offered a bat-winged, day-flying ball of mammalian fluff as big as my head and weighing under an ounce; I matched her with a marmoset. She tried me with a small-sized pink brontosaur (very rare), but I was ready with the duck-billed platypus, and that caused us to exchange some pretty smart remarks about mammalian eggs; she bounced. All trivial in a way; also, the happiest evening in my fifty-three tangled years of life.

She was a trifle hesitant to explain these kangaroo-like people, until she was sure I really wanted to know. It seems they are about the nearest parallel to human life on that planet; not a near parallel, of course, as she was careful to explain. Agreeable and always friendly souls (though they weren't always so, I'm sure) and of a somewhat more alert intelligence than we possess. Manual workers, mainly, because they prefer it nowadays, but some of them are excellent mathematicians. The first practical spaceship was invented by a group of them, with some assistance… Names offer difficulties. Because of the nature of the angelic language, they have scant use for them except for the purpose of written record, and writing naturally plays little part in their daily lives—no occasion to write a letter when a thousand miles is no obstacle to the speech of your mind. An angel's formal name is about as important to him as, say, my Social Security number is to me. She has not told me hers, because the phonetics on which their written language is based have no parallel in my mind. As we would speak a friend's name, an angel will project the friend's image to his friend's receiving mind. More pleasant and more intimate, I think—although it was a shock to me at first to glimpse my own ugly mug in my mind's eye. Stories are occasionally written, if there is something in them that should be preserved precisely as it was

in the first telling; but in their world the true storyteller has a more important place than the printer—he offers one of the best of their quieter pleasures: a good one can hold his audience for a week and never tire them.

"What is this 'angel' in your mind when you think of me?

"A being men have imagined for centuries, when they thought of themselves as they might like to be and not as they are." I did not try too painfully hard to learn much about the principles of space travel. The most my brain could take in of her explanation was something like: "Rocket—then phototropism." Now, that makes scant sense. So far as I know, phototropism—movement toward light—is an organic phenomenon. One thinks of it as a response of protoplasm, in some plants and animal organisms (most of them simple), to the stimulus of light; certainly not as a force capable of moving inorganic matter. I think that whatever may be the principle she was describing, this word "phototropism" was merely the nearest thing to it in my reservoir of language. Not even the angels can create understanding out of blank ignorance. At least I have learned not to set neat limits to the possible.

(There was a time when I did, though. I can see myself, not so many years back, like a homunculus squatting at the foot of Mt. McKinley, throwing together two handfuls of mud and shouting, "Look at the big mountain I made!")

And if I did know the physical principles which brought them here, and could write them in terms accessible to technicians resembling myself, I would not do it.

Here is a thing I am afraid no reader of this journal will believe: These people, as I have written, learned their method of space travel some twelve million years ago. But this is the first time they have ever used it to convey them to another planet. The heavens are rich in worlds, she tells me; on many of them there is life, often on very primitive levels. No external force prevented her people from going forth, colonizing, conquering, as far as they pleased. They could have populated a Galaxy. They did not, and for this reason: they believed they were not ready. More precisely: Not good enough.

Only some fifty million years ago, by her account, did they learn (as we may learn eventually) that intelligence without goodness is worse than high explosive in the hands of a baboon. For beings advanced beyond the level of Pithecanthropus, intelligence is a cheap commodity—not too hard to develop, hellishly easy to use for unconsidered ends. Whereas goodness is not to be achieved without unending effort of the hardest kind, within the self, whether the self be man or angel.

It is clear even to me that the conquest of evil is only one step,

not the most important. For goodness, so she tried to tell me, is an altogether positive quality; the part of living nature that swarms with such monstrosities as cruelty, meanness, bitterness, greed, is not to be filled by a vacuum when these horrors are eliminated. When you clear away a poisonous gas, you try to fill the whole room with clean air. Kindness, for only one example: one who can define kindness, only as the absence of cruelty has surely not begun to understand the nature of either.

They do not aim at perfection, these angels: only at the attainable… That time fifty million years ago was evidently one of great suffering and confusion. War and all its attendant plagues. They passed through many centuries while advances in technology merely worsened their condition and increased the peril of self-annihilation. They came through that, in time. War was at length so far outgrown that its recurrence was impossible, and the development of wholly rational beings could begin. Then they were ready to start growing up, through millennia of self-searching, self-discipline, seeking to derive the simple from the complex, discovering how to use knowledge and not be used by it. Even then, of course, they slipped back often enough. There were what she refers to as "eras of fatigue." In their dimmer past, they had had many dark ages, lost civilizations, hopeful beginnings ending in dust. Earlier still, they had come out of the slime, as we did.

But their period of deepest uncertainty and sternest self-appraisal did not come until twelve million years ago, when they knew a Universe could be theirs for the taking and knew they were not yet good enough.

They are in no more hurry than the stars. She tried to convey something tentatively, at this point, which was really beyond both of us. It had to do with time (not as I understand time) being perhaps the most essential attribute of God (not as I was ever able to understand that word). Seeing my mental exhaustion, she gave up the effort and later told me that the conception was extremely difficult for her, too—not only, I gathered, because of her youth and relative ignorance. There was also a hint that her father might not have wished her to bring my brain up to a hurdle like that one…

Of course, they explored. Their little spaceships were roaming the ether before there was anything like Man on this earth—roaming and listening, observing, recording; never entering nor taking part in the life of any home but their own. For five million years they even forbade themselves to go beyond their own Solar System, though it would have been easy to do so. And in the following seven million years, although they traveled to incredible distances, the same stern restraint was in force. It was altogether unrelated to what we should

call fear—that, I think, is as extinct in them as hate. There was so much to do at home!—I wish I could imagine it. They mapped the heavens and played in their own sunlight.

Naturally, I cannot tell you what goodness is. I know only, moderately well, what it seems to mean to us human beings. It appears that the best of us can, with enormous difficulty, achieve a manner of life in which goodness is reasonably dominant, by a not too precarious balance, for the greater part of the time. Often, wise men have indicated they hope for nothing better than that in our present condition. We are, in other words, a fraction alive; the rest is in the dark. Dante was a bitter masochist, Beethoven a frantic and miserable snob, Shakespeare wrote potboilers. And Christ said, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me."

But give us fifty million years—I am no pessimist. After all, I've watched one-celled organisms on the slide and listened to Brahms' Fourth. Night before last I said to the angel, "In spite of everything, you and I are kindred."

She granted me agreement.

* * * *

June 9

She was lying on my pillow this morning so that I could see her when I waked.

Her father has died, and she was with him when it happened. There was again that thought-impression that I could interpret only to mean that his life had been "saved." I was still sleep-bound when my mind asked, "What will you do?"

"Stay with you, if you wish it, for the rest of your life." Now, the last part of the message was clouded, but I am familiar with that—it seems to mean there is some further element that eludes me. I could not be mistaken about the part I did receive. It gives me amazing speculations. After all, I am only fifty-three; I might live for another thirty or forty years.

She was preoccupied this morning, but whatever she felt about her father's death that might be paralleled by sadness in a human being was hidden from me. She did say her father was sorry he had not been able to show me a two-moon night.

One adult, then, remains in this world. Except to say that he is two hundred years old and full of knowledge, and that he endured the long journey without serious ill effects, she has told me little about him. And there are ten children, including herself.

Something was sparkling at her throat. When she was aware of

my interest in it she took it off, and I fetched a magnifying glass. A necklace; under the glass, much like our finest human workmanship, if your imagination can reduce it to the proper scale. The stones appeared similar to the jewels we know diamonds, sapphires, rubies, emeralds, the diamonds snapping out every color under heaven; but there were two or three very dark-purple stones unlike anything I know—not amethysts, I am sure. The necklace was strung on something more slender than cobweb, and the design of the joining clasp was too delicate for my glass to help me. The necklace had been her mother's, she told me; as she put it back around her throat I thought I saw the same shy pride that any human girl might feel in displaying a new pretty.

She wanted to show me other things she had brought, and flew to the table where she had left a sort of satchel an inch and a half long—quite a load for her to fly with, but the translucent substance is so light that when she rested the satchel on my finger I scarcely felt it. She arranged a few articles happily for my inspection, and I put the glass to work again. One was a jeweled comb; she ran it through the down on her chest and legs to show me its use. There was a set of tools too small for the glass to interpret; I learned later they were a sewing kit. A book, and some writing instrument much like a metal pencil: imagine a book and pencil that could be used comfortably by hands hardly bigger than the paws of a mouse—that is the best I can do. The book, I understand, is a blank record for her use as needed.

And finally, when I was fully awake and dressed and we had finished breakfast, she reached in the bottom of the satchel for a parcel (heavy for her) and made me understand it was a gift for me. "My father made it for you, but I put in the stone myself, last night." She unwrapped it. A ring, precisely the size for my little finger.

I broke down, rather. She understood that, and sat on my shoulder petting my ear lobe till I had command of myself.

I have no idea what the jewel is. It shifts with the light from purple to jade-green to amber. The metal resembles platinum in appearance except for a tinge of rose at certain angles of light… When I stare into the stone, I think I see—never mind that now. I am not ready to write it down, and perhaps never will be; anyway, I must be sure.

We improved our housekeeping later in the morning. I showed her over the house. It isn't much—Cape Codder, two rooms up and two down. Every corner interested her, and when she found a shoe box in the bedroom closet, she asked for it. At her direction, I have arranged it on a chest near my bed and near the window, which will be always open; she says the mosquitoes will not bother me, and I don't doubt her. I unearthed a white silk scarf for the bottom of the

box; after asking my permission (as if I could want to refuse her anything!) she got her sewing kit and snipped off a piece of the scarf several inches square, folded it on itself several times, and sewed it into a narrow pillow an inch long. So now she had a proper bed and a room of her own. I wish I had something less coarse than silk, but she insists it's nice.

We have not talked very much today. in the afternoon she flew out for an hour's play in the cloud country; when she returned she let me know that she needed a long sleep. She is still sleeping, I think; I am writing this downstairs, fearing the light might disturb her.

Is it possible I can have thirty or forty years in her company? I wonder how teachable my mind still is. I seem to be able to assimilate new facts as well as I ever could; this ungainly carcass should be durable, with reasonable care. Of course, facts without a synthetic imagination are no better than scattered bricks; but perhaps my imagination—

I don't know.

Judy wants out. I shall turn in when she comes back. I wonder if poor Judy's life could be—the word is certainly "saved." I must ask.

* * * *

June 10

Last night when I stopped writing I did go to bed but I was restless, refusing sleep. At some time in the small hours—there was light from a single room—she flew over to me. The tensions dissolved like an illness, and my mind was able to respond with a certain calm.

I made plain (what I am sure she already knew) that I would never willingly part company with her, and then she gave me to understand that there are two alternatives for the remainder of my life. The choice, she says, is altogether mine, and I must take time to be sure of my decision.

I can live out my natural span, whatever it proves to be, and she will not leave me for long at any time. She will be there to counsel, teach, help me in anything good I care to undertake. She says she would enjoy this; for some reason she is, as we'd say in our language, fond of me. We'd have fun.

Lord, the books I could write! I fumble for words now, in the usual human way: whatever I put on paper is a miserable fraction of the potential; the words themselves are rarely the right ones. But under her guidance—

I could take a fair part in shaking the world. With words alone. I could preach to my own people. Before long, I would be heard.

I could study and explore. What small nibblings we have made at the sum of available knowledge! Suppose I brought in one leaf from outdoors, or one common little bug—in a few hours of studying it with her I'd know more of my own specialty than a flood of the best textbooks could tell me.

She has also let me know that when she and those who came with her have learned a little more about the human picture, it should be possible to improve my health greatly, and probably my life expectancy. I don't imagine my back could ever straighten, but she thinks the pain might be cleared away, possibly without drugs. I could have a clearer mind, in a body that would neither fail nor torment me.

Then there is the other alternative.

It seems they have developed a technique by means of which any unresisting living subject whose brain is capable of memory at all can experience a total recall. It is a byproduct, I understand, of their silent speech, and a very recent one. They have practiced it for only a few thousand years, and since their own understanding of the phenomenon is very incomplete, they classify it among their experimental techniques. In a general way, it may somewhat resemble that reliving of the past that psychoanalysis can sometimes bring about in a limited way for therapeutic purposes; but you must imagine that sort of thing tremendously magnified and clarified, capable of including every detail that has ever registered on the subject's brain; and the end result is very different. The purpose is not therapeutic, as we would understand it: quite the opposite. The end result is death. Whatever is recalled by this process is transmitted to the receiving mind, which can retain it and record any or all of it if such a record is desired; but to the subject who recalls it, it is a flowing away, without return. Thus it is not a true "remembering" but a giving. The mind is swept clear, naked of all its past, and, along with memory, life withdraws also. Very quietly. At the end, I suppose it must be like standing without resistance in the engulfment of a flood time, until finally the waters close over.

That, it seems, is how Camilla's life was "saved." Now, when I finally grasped that, I laughed, and the angel of course caught my joke. I was thinking about my neighbor Steele, who boarded the old lady for me in his henhouse for a couple of winters. Somewhere safe in the angelic records there must be a hen's-eye image of the patch in the seat of Steele's pants. Well—good. And, naturally, Camilla's view of me, too: not too unkind, I hope—she couldn't help the expression on her rigid little face, and I don't believe it ever meant anything.

At the other end of the scale is the saved life of, my angel's father. Recall can be a long process, she says, depending on the intricacy and richness of the mind recalling; and in all but the last stages it can be

halted at will. Her father's recall was begun when they were still far out in space and he knew that he could not long survive the journey. When that journey ended, the recall had progressed so far that very little actual memory remained to him of his life on that other planet. He had what must be called a "deductive memory"; from the material of the years not yet given away, he could reconstruct what must have been; and I assume the other adult who survived the passage must have been able to shelter him from errors that loss of memory might involve. This, I infer, is why he could not show me a two-moon night. I forgot to ask her whether the images he did send me were from actual or deductive memory. Deductive, I think, for there was a certain dimness about them not present when my angel gives me a picture of something seen with her own eyes.

Jade-green eyes, by the way—were you wondering?

In the same fashion, my own life could be saved. Every aspect of existence that I ever touched, that ever touched me, could be transmitted to some perfect record. The nature of the written record is beyond me, but I have no doubt of its relative perfection. Nothing important, good or bad, would be lost. And they need a knowledge of humanity, if they are to carry out whatever it is they have in mind.

It would be difficult, she tells me, and sometimes painful. Most of the effort would be hers, but some of it would have to be mine. In her period of infantile education, she elected what we should call zoology as her lifework; for that reason she was given intensive theoretical training in this technique. Right now, I guess she knows more than anyone else on this planet not only about what makes a hen tick but about how it feels to be a hen. Though a beginner, she is in all essentials already an expert. She can help me, she thinks (if I choose this alternative)—at any rate, ease me over the toughest spots, soothe away resistance, keep my courage from too much flagging.

For it seems that this process of recall is painful to an advanced intellect (she, without condescension, calls us very advanced) because, while all pretense and self-delusion are stripped away, there remains conscience, still functioning by whatever standards of good and bad the individual has developed in his lifetime. Our present knowledge of our own motives is such a pathetically small beginning!—hardly stronger than an infant's first effort to focus his eyes. I am merely wondering how much of my life (if I choose this way) will seem to me altogether hideous. Certainly plenty of the "good deeds" that I still cherish in memory like so many well-behaved cherubs will turn up with the leering aspect of greed or petty vanity or worse.

Not that I am a bad man, in any reasonable sense of the term; not a bit of it. I respect myself; no occasion to grovel and beat my chest; I'm not ashamed to stand comparison with any other fair sample of

the species. But there you are: I *am* human, and under the aspect of eternity so far, plus this afternoon's newspaper, that is a rather serious thing.

Without real knowledge, I think of this total recall as something like a passage down a corridor of myriad images—now dark, now brilliant; now pleasant, now horrible—guided by no certainty except an awareness of the open blind door at the end of it. It could have its pleasing moments and its consolations. I don't see how it could ever approximate the delight and satisfaction of living a few more years in this world with the angel lighting on my shoulder when she wishes, and talking to me.

I had to ask her of how great value such a record would be to them. Very great. Obvious enough—they can be of little use to us, by their standards, until they understand us; and they came here to be of use to us as well as to themselves. And understanding us, to them, means knowing us inside out with a completeness such as our most dedicated and laborious scholars could never imagine. I remember those twelve million years: they will not touch us until they are certain no harm will come of it. On our tortured planet, however, there is a time factor. They know that well enough, of course… Recall cannot begin unless the subject is willing or unresisting; to them, that has to mean willing, for any being with intellect enough to make a considered choice. Now, I wonder how many they could find who would be honestly willing to make that uneasy journey into death, for no reward except an assurance that they were serving their own kind and the angels?

More to the point, I wonder if I would be able to achieve such willingness myself, even with her help?

When this had been explained to me, she urged me again to make no hasty decision. And she pointed out to me what my thoughts were already groping at—why not both alternatives, within a reasonable limit of time? Why couldn't I have ten or fifteen years or more with her and then undertake the total recall—perhaps not until my physical powers had started toward senility? I thought that over.

This morning I had almost decided to choose that most welcome and comforting solution. Then the mailman brought my daily paper. Not that I needed any such reminder.

In the afternoon I asked her if she knew whether, in the present state of human technology, it would be possible for our folly to actually destroy this planet. She did not know, for certain. Three of the other children have gone away to different parts of the world, to learn what they can about that. But she had to tell me that such a thing has happened before, elsewhere in the heavens. I guess I won't write a letter to the papers advancing an explanation for the

occasional appearance of a nova among the stars. Doubtless others have hit on the same hypothesis without the aid of angels.

And that is not all I must consider. I could die by accident or sudden disease before I had begun to give my life.

Only now, at this very late moment, rubbing my sweaty forehead and gazing into the lights of that wonderful ring, have I been able to put together some obvious facts in the required synthesis.

I don't know, of course, what forms their assistance to us will take. I suspect human beings won't see or hear much of the angels for a long time to come. Now and then disastrous decisions may be altered, and those who believe themselves wholly responsible won't quite know why their minds worked that way. Here and there, maybe an influential mind will be rather strangely nudged into a better course. Something like that. There may be sudden new discoveries and inventions of kinds that will tend to neutralize the menace of our nastiest playthings. But whatever the angels decide to do, the record and analysis of my not too atypical life will be an aid: it could even be the small weight deciding the balance between triumph and failure. That is fact one.

Two: my angel and her brothers and sisters, for all their amazing level of advancement, are of perishable protoplasm, even as I am. Therefore, if this ball of earth becomes a ball of flame, they also will be destroyed. Even if they have the means to use their spaceship again or to build another, it might easily happen that they would not learn their danger in time to escape. And for all I know, this could be tomorrow. Or tonight.

So there can no longer be any doubt as to my choice, and I will tell her when she wakes.

* * * *

July 9

Tonight[2] there is no recall—I am to rest a while. I see it is almost a month since I last wrote in this journal. My total recall began three weeks ago, and I have already been able to give away the first twenty-eight years of my life.

Since I no longer require normal sleep, the recall begins at night, as soon as the lights begin to go out over there in the village and there is little danger of interruption. Daytimes, I putter about in my usual fashion. I have sold Steele my hens, and Judy's life was saved a week ago; that practically winds up my affairs, except that I want to write a codicil to my will. I might as well do that now, right here in this journal, instead of bothering my lawyer. It should be legal.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN: I hereby bequeath to my friend Lester Morse, M.D., of Augusta, Maine, the ring which will be found at my death on the fifth finger of my left hand; and I would urge Dr. Morse to retain this ring in his private possession at all times, and to make provision for its disposal, in the event of his own death, to some person in whose character he places the utmost faith.

(Signed) David Bannerman[3]

* * * *

Tonight she has gone away for a while, and I am to rest and do as I please until she returns. I shall spend the time filling in some blanks in this record, but I am afraid it will be a spotty job, unsatisfactory to any readers who are subject to the blessed old itch for facts. Mainly because there is so much I no longer care about. It is troublesome to try to decide what things would be considered important by interested strangers.

Except for the lack of any desire for sleep, and a bodily weariness that is not at all unpleasant, I notice no physical effects thus far. I have no faintest recollection of anything that happened earlier than my twenty-eighth birthday. My deductive memory seems rather efficient, and I am sure I could reconstruct most of the story if it were worth the bother: this afternoon I grubbed around among some old letters of that period, but they weren't very interesting. My knowledge of English is unaffected; I can still read scientific German and some French, because I had occasion to use those languages fairly often after I was twenty-eight. The scraps of Latin dating from high school are quite gone. So are algebra and all but the simplest propositions of high-school geometry: I never needed 'em. I can remember thinking of my mother after twenty-eight, but do not know whether the image this provides really resembles her; my father died when I was thirty-one, so I remember him as a sick old man. I believe I had a younger brother, but he must have died in childhood.[4]

Judy's passing was tranquil—pleasant for her, I think. It took the better part of a day. We went out to an abandoned field I know, and she lay in the sunshine with the angel sitting by her, while I dug a grave and then rambled off after wild raspberries. Toward evening the angel came and told me it was finished. And most interesting, she said. I don't see how there can have been anything distressing about it for Judy; after all, what hurts us worst is to have our favorite self-deceptions stripped away.

As the angel has explained it to me, her people, their cats, those kangaroo-folk, Man, and just possibly the cats on our planet (she

hasn't met them yet) are the only animals she knows who are introspective enough to develop self-delusion and related pretenses. I suggested she might find something of the sort, at least in rudimentary form, among some of the other primates. She was immensely interested and wanted to learn everything I could tell her about monkeys and apes. It seems that long ago on the other planet there used to be clumsy, winged creatures resembling the angels to about the degree that the large anthropoids resemble us. They became extinct some forty million years ago, in spite of enlightened efforts to keep their kind alive. Their birth rate became insufficient for replacement, as if some necessary spark had simply flickered out; almost as if nature, or whatever name you prefer for the unknown, had with gentle finality written them off…

I have not found the recall painful, at least not in retrospect. There must have been sharp moments, mercifully forgotten, along with their causes, as if the process had gone on under anesthesia. Certainly there were plenty of incidents in my first twenty-eight years that I should not care to offer to the understanding of any but the angels. Quite often I must have been mean, selfish, base in any number of ways, if only to judge by the record since twenty-eight. Those old letters touch on a few of these things. To me, they now matter only as material for a record which is safely out of my hands.

However, to any persons I may have harmed, I wish to say this: you were hurt by aspects of my humanity which may not, in a few million years, be quite so common among us all. Against these darker elements I struggled, in my human fashion, as you do yourselves. The effort is not wasted.

It was a week after I told the angel my decision before she was prepared to start the recall. During that week she searched my present mind more closely than I should have imagined was possible: she had to be sure. During that week of hard questions I dare say she learned more about my kind than has ever gone on record even in a physician's office; I hope she did. To any psychiatrist who might question that, I offer a naturalist's suggestion: it is easy to imagine, after some laborious time, that we have noticed everything a given patch of ground can show us; but alter the viewpoint only a little—dig down a foot with a spade, say, or climb a tree branch and look downward—it's a whole new world.

When the angel was not exploring me in this fashion, she took pains to make me glimpse the satisfactions and million rewarding experiences I might have if I chose the other way. I see how necessary, that was; at the time it seemed almost cruel. She had to do it, for my own sake, and I am glad that I was somehow able to stand fast to my original choice. So was she, in the end; she has even said she loves me

for it. What that troubling word means to her is not within my mind: I am satisfied to take it in the human sense.

Some evening during that week—I think it was June 12—Lester dropped around for sherry and chess. Hadn't seen him in quite a while, and haven't since. There is a moderate polio scare this summer, and it keeps him on the jump. The angel retired behind some books on an upper shelf—I'm afraid it was dusty—and had fun with our chess. She had a fair view of your bald spot, Lester; later she remarked that she liked your looks, and can't you do something about that weight? She suggested an odd expedient, which I believe has occurred to your medical self from time to time—eating less.

Maybe she shouldn't have done what she did with those chess games. Nothing more than my usual blundering happened until after my first ten moves; by that time I suppose she had absorbed the principles and she took over, slightly.

I was not fully aware of it until I saw Lester looking like a boiled duck: I had imagined my astonishing moves were the result of my own damn cleverness.

Seriously, Lester, think back to that evening. You've played in stiff amateur tournaments; you know your own abilities and you know mine. Ask yourself whether I could have done anything like that without help. I tell you again, I didn't study the game in the interval when you weren't there. I've never had a chess book in the library, and if I had, no amount of study would take me into your class. Haven't that sort of mentality—just your humble sparring partner, and I've enjoyed it on that basis, as you might enjoy watching a prima-donna surgeon pull off some miracle you wouldn't dream of attempting yourself. Even if your game had been way below par that evening (I don't think it was), I could never have pinned your ears back three times running, without help. That evening you were a long way out of your class, that's all.

I couldn't tell you anything about it at the time—she was clear on that point—so I could only bumble and preen myself and leave you mystified. But she wants me to write anything I choose in this journal, and somehow, Lester, I think you may find the next few decades pretty interesting. You're still young—some ten years younger than I. I think you'll see many things that I do wish I myself might see come to pass—or I would so wish if I were not convinced that my choice was the right one.

Most of those new events will not be spectacular, I'd guess. Many of the turns to a better way will hardly be recognized at the time for what they are, by you or anyone else. Obviously, our nature being what it is, we shall not jump into heaven overnight. To hope for that would be as absurd as it is to imagine that any formula, ideology,

theory of social pattern, can bring us into Utopia. As I see it, Lester—and I think your consulting room would have told you the same even if your own intuition were not enough—there is only one battle of importance: Armageddon. And Armageddon field is within each self, world without end.

At the moment I believe I am the happiest man who ever lived.

* * * *

July 20

All but the last ten years now given away. The physical fatigue (still pleasant) is quite overwhelming. I am not troubled by the weeds in my garden patch—merely a different sort of flowers where I had planned something else. An hour ago she brought me the seed of a blown dandelion, to show me how lovely it was—I don't suppose I had ever noticed. I hope whoever takes over this place will bring it back to farming: they say the ten acres below the house used to be good potato land—nice early ground.

It is delightful to sit in the sun, as if I were old.

After thumbing over earlier entries in this journal, I see I have often felt quite bitter toward my own kind. I deduce that I must have been a lonely man—much of the loneliness self-imposed. A great part of my bitterness must have been no more than one ugly by-product of a life spent too much apart. Some of it doubtless came from objective causes, yet I don't believe I ever had more cause than any moderately intelligent man who would like to see his world a pleasanter place than it ever has been. My angel tells me that the pain in my back is due to an injury received in some early stage of the world war that still goes on. That could have soured me, perhaps. It's all right—it's all in the record.

She is racing with a hummingbird—holding back, I think, to give the ball of green fluff a break.

Another note for you, Lester. I have already indicated that my ring is to be yours. I don't want to tell you what I have discovered of its properties, for fear it might not give you the same pleasure and interest that it has given me. Of course, like any spot of shifting light and color, it is an aid to self-hypnosis. It is much, much more than that, but—find out for yourself, at some time when you are a little protected from everyday distractions. I know it can't harm you, because I know its source.

By the way, I wish you would convey to my publishers my request that they either discontinue manufacture of my *Introductory Biology* or else bring out a new edition revised in accordance with

some notes you will find in the top left drawer of my library desk. I glanced through that book after my angel assured me that I wrote it, and I was amazed. However, I'm afraid my notes are messy (I call them mine by a poetic license), and they may be too advanced for the present day—though the revision is mainly a matter of leaving out certain generalities that ain't so. Use your best judgment: it's a very minor textbook, and the thing isn't too important. A last wriggle of my personal vanity.

* * * *

July 27

I have seen a two-moon night.

It was given to me by that other grownup, at the end of a wonderful visit, when he and six of those nine other children came to see me. It was last night, I think—yes, must have been. First there was a murmur of wings above the house; my angel flew in, laughing; then they were here, all about me. Full of gaiety and colored fire, showing off in every way they knew would please me. Each one had something graceful and friendly to say to me. One brought me a moving image of the St. Lawrence seen at morning from half a mile up—clouds—eagles; now, how could he know that would delight me so much? And each one thanked me for what I had done.

But it's been so easy!

And at the end the old one—his skin is quite brown, and his down is white and gray—gave the remembered image of a two-moon night. He saw it some sixty years ago.

I have not even considered making an effort to describe it—my fingers will not hold this pencil much longer tonight. Oh—soaring buildings of white and amber, untroubled countryside, silver on curling rivers, a glimpse of open sea; a moon rising in clarity, another setting in a wreath of cloud, between them a wide wandering of unfamiliar stars; and here and there the angels, worthy after fifty million years to live in such a night. No, I cannot describe anything like that. But, you human kindred of mine, I can do something better. I can tell you that this two-moon night, glorious as it was, was no more beautiful than a night under a single moon on this ancient and familiar Earth might be—if you will imagine that the rubbish of human evil has been cleared away and that our own people have started at last on the greatest of all explorations.

* * * *

July 29

Nothing now remains to give away but the memory of the time that has passed since the angel came. I am to rest as long as I wish, write whatever I want to. Then I shall get myself over to the bed and lie down as if for sleep. She tells me that I can keep my eyes open: she will close them for me when I no longer see her.

I remain convinced that our human case is hopeful. I feel sure that in only a few thousand years we may be able to perform some of the simpler preparatory tasks, such as casting out evil and loving our neighbors. And if that should prove to be so, who can doubt that in another fifty million years we might well be only a little lower than the angels?

* * * *

LIBRARIAN'S NOTE: As is generally known, the original of the Bannerman Journal is said to have been in the possession of Dr. Lester Morse at the time of the latter's disappearance in 1964, and that disappearance has remained an unsolved mystery to the present day. McCarran is known to have visited Captain Garrison Blaine in October, 1951, but no record remains of that visit. Captain Blaine appears to have been a bachelor who lived alone. He was killed in line of duty, December, 1951. McCarran is believed not to have written about nor discussed the Bannerman affair with anyone else. It is almost certain that he himself removed the extract and related papers from the files (unofficially, it would seem!) when he severed his connection with the FBI in 1957; at any rate, they were found among his effects after his assassination and were released to the public, considerably later, by Mrs. McCarran.

The following memorandum was originally attached to the extract from the Bannerman Journal; it carries the McCarran initialing.

* * * *

Aug. 11, 1951

The original letter of complaint written by Stephen Clyde, M.D., and mentioned in the accompanying letter of Captain Blaine, has unfortunately been lost, owing perhaps to an error in filing.

Personnel presumed responsible have been instructed not to allow such error to be repeated except if, as, and/or when necessary.

C. McC.

* * * *

On the margin of this memorandum there was a penciled notation, later erased. The imprint is sufficient to show the unmistakable McCarran script. The notation read in part as follows: *Far be it from a McC. to lose his job except if, as, and/or*—the rest is undecipherable, except for a terminal word which is regrettably unparliamentary.

* * * *

STATEMENT BY LESTER MORSE, M.D., DATED AUGUST 9, 1951

On the afternoon of July 30, 1951, acting on what I am obliged to describe as an unexpected impulse, I drove out to the country for the purpose of calling on my friend Dr. David Bannerman. I had not seen him nor had word from him since the evening of June 12 of this year.

I entered, as was my custom, without knocking. After calling to him and hearing no response, I went upstairs to his bedroom and found him dead. From superficial indications I judged that death must have taken place during the previous night. He was lying on his bed on his left side, comfortably disposed as if for sleep but fully dressed, with a fresh shirt and clean summer slacks. His eyes and mouth were closed, and there was no trace of the disorder to be expected at even the easiest natural death. Because of these signs I assumed, as soon as I had determined the absence of breath and heartbeat and noted the chill of the body, that some neighbor must have found him already, performed these simple rites out of respect for him, and probably notified a local physician or other responsible person. I therefore waited (Dr. Bannerman had no telephone), expecting that someone would soon call.

Dr. Bannerman's journal was on a table near his bed, open to that page on which he has written a codicil to his will. I read that part. Later, while I was waiting for others to come, I read the remainder of the journal, as I believe he wished me to do. The ring he mentions was on the fifth finger of his left hand, and it is now in my possession. When writing that codicil Dr. Bannerman must have overlooked or forgotten the fact that in his formal will, written some months earlier, he had appointed me executor. If there are legal technicalities involved, I shall be pleased to cooperate fully with the proper authorities.

The ring, however, will remain in my keeping, since that was Dr. Bannerman's expressed wish, and I am not prepared to offer it for

examination or discussion under any circumstances.

The notes for a revision of one of his textbooks were in his desk, as noted in the journal. They are by no means “messy”; nor are they particularly revolutionary except insofar as he wished to rephrase, as theory or hypothesis, certain statements that I would have supposed could be regarded as axiomatic. This is not my field, and I am not competent to judge. I shall take up the matter with his publishers at the earliest opportunity.[5]

So far as I can determine, and bearing in mind the results of the autopsy performed by Stephen Clyde, M.D., the death of Dr. David Bannerman was not inconsistent with the presence of an embolism of some type not distinguishable post mortem. I have so stated on the certificate of death. It would seem to be not in the public interest to leave such questions in doubt. I am compelled to add one other item of medical opinion for what it may be worth:

I am not a psychiatrist, but, owing to the demands of general practice, I have found it advisable to keep as up to date as possible with current findings and opinion in this branch of medicine. Dr. Bannerman possessed, in my opinion, emotional and intellectual stability to a better degree than anyone else of comparable intelligence in the entire field of my acquaintance, personal and professional. If it is suggested that he was suffering from a hallucinatory psychosis, I can only say that it must have been of a type quite outside my experience and not described, so far as I know, anywhere in the literature of psychopathology.

Dr. Bannerman’s house, on the afternoon of July 30, was in good order. Near the open, unscreened window of his bedroom there was a coverless shoe box with a folded silk scarf in the bottom. I found no pillow such as Dr. Bannerman describes in the journal, but observed that a small section had been cut from the scarf. In this box, and near it, there was a peculiar fragrance, faint, aromatic, and very sweet, such as I have never encountered before and therefore cannot describe.

It may or may not have any bearing on the case that, while I remained in his house that afternoon, I felt no sense of grief or personal loss, although Dr. Bannerman had been a loved and honored friend for a number of years. I merely had, and have, a conviction that after the completion of some very great undertaking, he had found peace.

YOUTH, by Isaac Asimov

CHAPTER I

There was a spatter of pebbles against the window and the youngster stirred in his sleep. Another, and he was awake.

He sat up stiffly in bed. Seconds passed while he interpreted his strange surroundings. He wasn't in his own home, of course. This was out in the country. It was colder than it should be and there was green at the window.

"Slim!"

The call was a hoarse, urgent whisper, and the youngster bounded to the open window.

Slim wasn't his real name, but the new friend he had met the day before had needed only one look at his slight figure to say, "You're Slim." He added, "I'm Red."

Red wasn't his real name, either, but its appropriateness was obvious. They were friends instantly with the quick unquestioning friendship of young ones not yet quite in adolescence, before even the first stains of adulthood began to make their appearance.

Slim cried, "Hi, Red!" and waved cheerfully, still blinking the sleep out of himself.

Red kept to his croaking whisper, "Quiet! You want to wake somebody?"

Slim noticed all at once that the sun scarcely topped the low hills in the east, that the shadows were long and soft, and that the grass was wet.

Slim said, more softly, "What's the matter?"

Red only waved for him to come out.

Slim dressed quickly, gladly confining his morning wash to the momentary sprinkle of a little lukewarm water. He let the air dry the exposed portions of his body as he ran out, while bare skin grew wet against the dewy grass.

Red said, "You've got to be quiet. If Mom wakes up or Dad or your Dad or even any of the hands then it'll be 'Come on in or you'll catch your death of cold.'"

He mimicked voice and tone faithfully, so that Slim laughed and thought that there had never been so funny a fellow as Red.

Slim said, eagerly, "Do you come out here every day like this, Red? Real early? It's like the whole world is just yours, isn't it, Red? No one else around and all like that." He felt proud at being allowed entrance into this private world.

Red stared at him sidelong. He said carelessly, "I've been up for hours. Didn't you hear it last night?"

"Hear what?"

"Thunder."

"Was there a thunderstorm?" Slim never slept through a thunderstorm.

"I guess not. But there was thunder. I heard it, and then I went to the window and it wasn't raining. It was all stars and the sky was just getting sort of almost gray. You know what I mean?"

Slim had never seen it so, but he nodded.

"So I just thought I'd go out," said Red.

They walked along the grassy side of the concrete road that split the panorama right down the middle all the way down to where it vanished among the hills. It was so old that Red's father couldn't tell Red when it had been built. It didn't have a crack or a rough spot in it.

Red said, "Can you keep a secret?"

"Sure, Red. What kind of a secret?"

"Just a secret. Maybe I'll tell you and maybe I won't. I don't know yet." Red broke a long, supple stem from a fern they passed, methodically stripped it of its leaflets and swung what was left whip-fashion. For a moment, he was on a wild charger, which reared and champed under his iron control. Then he got tired, tossed the whip aside and stowed the charger away in a corner of his imagination for future use.

He said, "There'll be a circus around."

Slim said, "That's no secret. I knew that. My Dad told me even before we came here—"

"That's not the secret. Fine secret! Ever see a circus?"

"Oh, sure. You bet."

"Like it?"

"Say, there isn't anything I like better."

Red was watching out of the corner of his eyes again. "Ever think you would like to be with a circus? I mean, for good?"

Slim considered, "I guess not. I think I'll be an astronomer like my Dad. I think he wants me to be."

"Huh! Astronomer!" said Red.

Slim felt the doors of the new, private world closing on him and astronomy became a thing of dead stars and black, empty space.

He said, placatingly, "A circus *would* be more fun."

"You're just saying that."

"No, I'm not. I mean it."

Red grew argumentative. "Suppose you had a chance to join the circus right now. What would you do?"

"I—I—"

"See!" Red affected scornful laughter.

Slim was stung. "I'd join up."

"Go on."

"Try me."

Red whirled at him, strange and intense. "You meant that? You want to go in with me?"

"What do you mean?" Slim stepped back a bit, surprised by the unexpected challenge.

"I got something that can get us into the circus. Maybe someday we can even have a circus of our own. We could be the biggest circus-fellows in the world. That's if you want to go in with me. Otherwise—Well, I guess I can do it on my own. I just thought: Let's give good old Slim a chance."

The world was strange and glamorous, and Slim said, "Sure thing, Red. I'm in! What is it, huh, Red? Tell me what it is."

"Figure it out. What's the most important thing in circuses?"

Slim thought desperately. He wanted to give the right answer. Finally, he said, "Acrobats?"

"Holy Smokes! I wouldn't go five steps to look at acrobats."

"I don't know then."

"Animals, that's what! What's the best side-show? Where are the biggest crowds? Even in the main rings the best acts are animal acts." There was no doubt in Red's voice.

"Do you think so?"

"Everyone thinks so. You ask anyone. Anyway, I found animals this morning. Two of them."

"And you've got them?"

"Sure. That's the secret. Are you telling?"

"Of course not."

"Okay. I've got them in the barn. Do you want to see them?"

They were almost at the barn; its huge open door black. Too black. They had been heading there all the time. Slim stopped in his tracks.

He tried to make his words casual. "Are they big?"

"Would I fool with them if they were big? They can't hurt you. They're only about so long. I've got them in a cage."

They were in the barn now and Slim saw the large cage suspended from a hook in the roof. It was covered with stiff canvas.

Red said, "We used to have some bird there or something. Anyway, they can't get away from there. Come on, let's go up to the loft."

They clambered up the wooden stairs and Red hooked the cage toward them.

Slim pointed and said, "There's sort of a hole in the canvas."

Red frowned. "How'd that get there?" He lifted the canvas, looked in, and said, with relief, "They're still there."

"The canvas appeared to be burned," worried Slim.

“You want to look, or don’t you?”

Slim nodded slowly. He wasn’t sure he wanted to, after all. They might be—

But the canvas had been jerked off and there they were. Two of them, the way Red said. They were small, and sort of disgusting-looking. The animals moved quickly as the canvas lifted and were on the side toward the youngsters. Red poked a cautious finger at them.

“Watch out,” said Slim, in agony.

“They don’t hurt you,” said Red. “Ever see anything like them?”

“No.”

“Can’t you see how a circus would jump at a chance to have these?”

“Maybe they’re too small for a circus.”

Red looked annoyed. He let go the cage which swung back and forth pendulum-fashion. “You’re just trying to back out, aren’t you?”

“No, I’m not. It’s just—”

“They’re not too small, don’t worry. Right now, I’ve only got one worry.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, I’ve got to keep them till the circus comes, don’t I? I’ve got to figure out what to feed them meanwhile.”

The cage swung and the little trapped creatures clung to its bars, gesturing at the youngsters with queer, quick motions—almost as though they were intelligent.

CHAPTER II

The Astronomer entered the dining room with decorum. He felt very much the guest.

He said, "Where are the youngsters? My son isn't in his room."

The Industrialist smiled. "They've been out for hours. However, breakfast was forced into them among the women some time ago, so there is nothing to worry about. Youth, Doctor, youth!"

"Youth!" The word seemed to depress the Astronomer.

They ate breakfast in silence. The Industrialist said once, "You really think they'll come. The day looks so—*normal.*"

The Astronomer said, "They'll come."

That was all.

Afterward the Industrialist said, "You'll pardon me. I can't conceive your playing so elaborate a hoax. You really spoke to them?"

"As I speak to you. At least, in a sense. They can project thoughts."

"I gathered that must be so from your letter. How, I wonder."

"I could not say. I asked them and, of course, they were vague. Or perhaps it was just that I could not understand. It involves a projector for the focussing of thought and, even more than that, conscious attention on the part of both projector and receptor. It was quite a while before I realized they were trying to think at me. Such thought-projectors may be part of the science they will give us."

"Perhaps," said the Industrialist. "Yet think of the changes it would bring to society. A thought-projector!"

"Why not? Change would be good for us."

"I don't think so."

"It is only in old age that change is unwelcome," said the Astronomer, "and races can be old as well as individuals."

The Industrialist pointed out the window. "You see that road. It was built Beforethewars. I don't know exactly when. It is as good now as the day it was built. We couldn't possibly duplicate it now. The race was young when that was built, eh?"

"Then? Yes! At least they weren't afraid of new things."

"No. I wish they had been. Where is the society of Beforethewars? Destroyed, Doctor! What good were youth and new things? We are better off now. The world is peaceful and jogs along. The race goes nowhere but after all, there is nowhere to go.*They* proved that. The men who built the road. I will speak with your visitors as I agreed, if they come. But I think I will only ask them to go."

"The race is not going nowhere," said the Astronomer, earnestly. "It is going toward final destruction. My university has a smaller

student body each year. Fewer books are written. Less work is done. An old man sleeps in the sun and his days are peaceful and unchanging, but each day finds him nearer death all the same."

"Well, well," said the Industrialist.

"No, don't dismiss it. Listen. Before I wrote you, I investigated your position in the planetary economy."

"And you found me solvent?" interrupted the Industrialist, smiling.

"Why, yes. Oh, I see, you are joking. And yet—perhaps the joke is not far off. You are less solvent than your father and he was less solvent than his father. Perhaps your son will no longer be solvent. It becomes too troublesome for the planet to support even the industries that still exist, though they are toothpicks to the oak trees of Beforethewars. We will be back to village economy and then to what? The caves?"

"And the infusion of fresh technological knowledge will be the changing of all that?"

"Not just the new knowledge. Rather the whole effect of change, of a broadening of horizons. Look, sir, I chose you to approach in this matter not only because you were rich and influential with government officials, but because you had an unusual reputation, for these days, of daring to break with tradition. Our people will resist change and you would know how to handle them, how to see to it that—that—"

"That the youth of the race is revived?"

"Yes."

"With its atomic bombs?"

"The atomic bombs," returned the Astronomer, "need not be the end of civilization. These visitors of mine had their atomic bomb, or whatever their equivalent was on their own worlds, and survived it, because they didn't give up. Don't you see? It wasn't the bomb that defeated us, but our own shell shock. This may be the last chance to reverse the process."

"Tell me," said the Industrialist, "what do these friends from space want in return?"

The Astronomer hesitated. He said, "I will be truthful with you. They come from a denser planet. Ours is richer in the lighter atoms."

"They want magnesium? Aluminum?"

"No, sir. Carbon and hydrogen. They want coal and oil."

"Really?"

The Astronomer said, quickly, "You are going to ask why creatures who have mastered space travel, and therefore atomic power, would want coal and oil. I can't answer that."

The Industrialist smiled. "But I can. This is the best evidence yet

of the truth of your story. Superficially, atomic power would seem to preclude the use of coal and oil. However, quite apart from the energy gained by their combustion they remain, and always will remain, the basic raw material for all organic chemistry. Plastics, dyes, pharmaceuticals, solvents. Industry could not exist without them, even in an atomic age. Still, if coal and oil are the low price for which they would sell us the troubles and tortures of racial youth, my answer is that the commodity would be dear if offered gratis."

The Astronomer sighed and said, "There are the boys!"

They were visible through the open window, standing together in the grassy field and lost in animated conversation. The Industrialist's son pointed imperiously and the Astronomer's son nodded and made off at a run toward the house.

The Industrialist said, "There is the Youth you speak of. Our race has as much of it as it ever had."

"Yes, but we age them quickly and pour them into the mold."

Slim scuttled into the room, the door banging behind him.

The Astronomer said, in mild disapproval, "What's this?"

Slim looked up in surprise and came to a halt. "I beg your pardon. I didn't know anyone was here. I am sorry to have interrupted." His enunciation was almost painfully precise.

The Industrialist said, "It's all right, youngster."

But the Astronomer said, "Even if you had been entering an empty room, son, there would be no cause for slamming a door."

"Nonsense," insisted the Industrialist. "The youngster has done no harm. You simply scold him for being young. You, with your views!"

He said to Slim, "Come here, lad."

Slim advanced slowly.

"How do you like the country, eh?"

"Very much, sir, thank you."

"My son has been showing you about the place, has he?"

"Yes, sir. Red—I mean—"

"No, no. Call him Red. I call him that myself. Now tell me, what are you two up to, eh?"

Slim looked away. "Why—just exploring, sir."

The Industrialist turned to the Astronomer. "There you are, youthful curiosity and adventure-lust. The race has not yet lost it."

Slim said, "Sir?"

"Yes, lad."

The youngster took a long time in getting on with it. He said, "Red sent me in for something good to eat, but I don't exactly know what he meant. I didn't like to say so."

"Why, just ask cook. She'll have something good for young'uns to eat."

“Oh, no, sir. I mean for animals.”

“For animals?”

“Yes, sir. What do animals eat?”

The Astronomer said, “I am afraid my son is city-bred.”

“Well,” said the Industrialist, “there’s no harm in that. What kind of an animal, lad?”

“A small one, sir.”

“Then try grass or leaves, and if they don’t want that, nuts or berries would probably do the trick.”

“Thank you, sir.” Slim ran out again, closing the door gently behind him.

The Astronomer said, “Do you suppose they’ve trapped an animal alive?” He was obviously perturbed.

“That’s common enough. There’s no shooting on my estate and it’s tame country, full of rodents and small creatures. Red is always coming home with pets of one sort or another. They rarely maintain his interest for long.”

He looked at the wall clock. “Your friends should have been here by now, shouldn’t they?”

CHAPTER III

The swaying had come to a halt and it was dark. The Explorer was not comfortable in the alien air. It felt as thick as soup and he had to breathe shallowly. Even so—

He reached out in a sudden need for company. The Merchant was warm to the touch. His breathing was rough, he moved in an occasional spasm, and was obviously asleep. The Explorer hesitated and decided not to wake him. It would serve no real purpose.

There would be no rescue, of course. That was the penalty paid for the high profits which unrestrained competition could lead to. The Merchant who opened a new planet could have a ten year monopoly of its trade, which he might hug to himself or, more likely, rent out to all comers at a stiff price. It followed that planets were searched for in secrecy and, preferably, away from the usual trade routes. In a case such as theirs, then, there was little or no chance that another ship would come within range of their subetherics except for the most improbable of coincidences. Even if they were in their ship, that is, rather than in this—this—*cage*.

The Explorer grasped the thick bars. Even if they blasted those away, as they could, they would be stuck too high in open air for leaping.

It was too bad. They had landed twice before in the scout-ship. They had established contact with the natives who were grotesquely huge, but mild and unaggressive. It was obvious that they had once owned a flourishing technology, but hadn't faced up to the consequences of such a technology. It would have been a wonderful market.

And it was a tremendous world. The Merchant, especially, had been taken aback. He had known the figures that expressed the planet's diameter, but from a distance of two light-seconds, he had stood at the visi-plate and muttered, "Unbelievable!"

"Oh, there are larger worlds," the Explorer said. It wouldn't do for an Explorer to be too easily impressed.

"Inhabited?"

"Well, no."

"Why, you could drop your planet into that large ocean and drown it."

The Explorer smiled. It was a gentle dig at his Arcturian homeland, which was smaller than most planets. He said, "Not quite."

The Merchant followed along the line of his thoughts. "And the inhabitants are large in proportion to their world?" He sounded as though the news struck him less favorably now.

"Nearly ten times our height."

"Are you sure they are friendly?"

"That is hard to say. Friendship between alien intelligences is an imponderable. They are not dangerous, I think. We've come across other groups that could not maintain equilibrium after the atomic war stage and you know the results. Introversion. Retreat. Gradual decadence and increasing gentleness."

"Even if they are such monsters?"

"The principle remains."

It was about then that the Explorer felt the heavy throbbing of the engines.

He frowned and said, "We are descending a bit too quickly."

There had been some speculation on the dangers of landing some hours before. The planetary target was a huge one for an oxygen-water world. Though it lacked the size of the uninhabitable hydrogen-ammonia planets and its low density made its surface gravity fairly normal, its gravitational forces fell off but slowly with distance. In short, its gravitational potential was high and the ship's Calculator was a run-of-the-mill model not designed to plot landing trajectories at that potential range. That meant the Pilot would have to use manual controls.

It would have been wiser to install a more high-powered model, but that would have meant a trip to some outpost of civilization; lost time; perhaps a lost secret. The Merchant demanded an immediate landing.

The Merchant felt it necessary to defend his position now. He said angrily to the Explorer, "Don't you think the Pilot knows his job? He landed you safely twice before."

Yes, thought the Explorer, in a scout-ship, not in this unmaneuverable freighter. Aloud, he said nothing.

He kept his eye on the visi-plate. They were descending too quickly. There was no room for doubt. Much too quickly.

The Merchant said, peevishly, "Why do you keep silence?"

"Well, then, if you wish me to speak, I would suggest that you strap on your Floater and help me prepare the Ejector."

The Pilot fought a noble fight. He was no beginner. The atmosphere, abnormally high and thick in the gravitational potential of this world whipped and burned about the ship, but to the very last it looked as though he might bring it under control despite that.

He even maintained course, following the extrapolated line to the point on the northern continent toward which they were headed. Under other circumstances, with a shade more luck, the story would eventually have been told and retold as a heroic and masterly reversal of a lost situation. But within sight of victory, tired body and tired

nerves clamped a control bar with a shade too much pressure. The ship, which had almost levelled off, dipped down again.

There was no room to retrieve the final error. There was only a mile left to fall. The Pilot remained at his post to the actual landing, his only thought that of breaking the force of the crash, of maintaining the spaceworthiness of the vessel. He did not survive. With the ship bucking madly in a soupy atmosphere, few Ejectors could be mobilized and only one of them in time.

When afterwards, the Explorer lifted out of unconsciousness and rose to his feet, he had the definite feeling that but for himself and the Merchant, there were no survivors. And perhaps that was an over-calculation. His Floater had burnt out while still sufficiently distant from surface to have the fall stun him. The Merchant might have had less luck, even, than that.

He was surrounded by a world of thick, ropy stalks of grass, and in the distance were trees that reminded him vaguely of similar structures on his native Arcturian world except that their lowest branches were high above what he would consider normal tree-tops.

He called, his voice sounding basso in the thick air and the Merchant answered. The Explorer made his way toward him, thrusting violently at the coarse stalks that barred his path.

“Are you hurt?” he asked.

The Merchant grimaced. “I’ve sprained something. It hurts to walk.”

The Explorer probed gently. “I don’t think anything is broken. You’ll have to walk despite the pain.”

“Can’t we rest first?”

“It’s important to try to find the ship. If it is spaceworthy or if it can be repaired, we may live. Otherwise, we won’t.”

“Just a few minutes. Let me catch my breath.”

The Explorer was glad enough for those few minutes. The Merchant’s eyes were already closed. He allowed his to do the same.

He heard the trampling and his eyes snapped open. Never sleep on a strange planet, he told himself futilely.

The Merchant was awake too and his steady screaming was a rumble of terror.

The Explorer called, “It’s only a native of this planet. It won’t harm you.”

But even as he spoke, the giant had swooped down and in a moment they were in its grasp being lifted closer to its monstrous ugliness.

The Merchant struggled violently and, of course, quite futilely. “Can’t you talk to it?” he yelled.

The Explorer could only shake his head. “I can’t reach it with the

Projector. It won't be listening."

"Then blast it. Blast it down."

"We can't do that." The phrase "you fool" had almost been added. The Explorer struggled to keep his self-control. They were swallowing space as the monster moved purposefully away.

"Why not?" cried the Merchant. "You can reach your blaster. I see it in plain sight. Don't be afraid of falling."

"It's simpler than that. If this monster is killed, you'll never trade with this planet. You'll never even leave it. You probably won't live the day out."

"Why? Why?"

"Because this is one of the young of the species. You should know what happens when a trader kills a native young, even accidentally. What's more, if this is the target-point, then we are on the estate of a powerful native. This might be one of his brood."

That was how they entered their present prison. They had carefully burnt away a portion of the thick, stiff covering and it was obvious that the height from which they were suspended was a killing one.

Now, once again, the prison-cage shuddered and lifted in an upward arc. The Merchant rolled to the lower rim and startled awake. The cover lifted and light flooded in. As was the case the time before, there were two specimens of the young. They were not very different in appearance from adults of the species, reflected the Explorer, though, of course, they were considerably smaller.

A handful of reedy green stalks was stuffed between the bars. Its odor was not unpleasant but it carried clods of soil at its ends.

The Merchant drew away and said, huskily, "What are they doing?"

The Explorer said, "Trying to feed us, I should judge. At least this seems to be the native equivalent of grass."

The cover was replaced and they were set swinging again, alone with their fodder.

CHAPTER IV

Slim started at the sound of footsteps and brightened when it turned out to be only Red.

He said, “No one’s around. I had my eye peeled, you bet.”

Red said, “Ssh. Look. You take this stuff and stick it in the cage. I’ve got to scoot back to the house.”

“What is it?” Slim reached reluctantly.

“Ground meat. Holy Smokes, haven’t you ever seen ground meat? That’s what you should’ve got when I sent you to the house instead of coming back with that stupid grass.”

Slim was hurt. “How’d I know they don’t eat grass. Besides, ground meat doesn’t come loose like that. It comes in cellophane and it isn’t that color.”

“Sure—in the city. Out here we grind our own and it’s always this color till it’s cooked.”

“You mean it isn’t cooked?” Slim drew away quickly.

Red looked disgusted. “Do you think animals eat *cooked*food. Come on, take it. It won’t hurt you. I tell you there isn’t much time.”

“Why? What’s doing back at the house?”

“I don’t know. Dad and your father are walking around. I think maybe they’re looking for me. Maybe the cook told them I took the meat. Anyway, we don’t want them coming here after me.”

“Didn’t you ask the cook before you took this stuff?”

“Who? That crab? Shouldn’t wonder if she only let me have a drink of water because Dad makes her. Come on. Take it.”

Slim took the large glob of meat though his skin crawled at the touch. He turned toward the barn and Red sped away in the direction from which he had come.

He slowed when he approached the two adults, took a few deep breaths to bring himself back to normal, and then carefully and nonchalantly sauntered past. (They were walking in the general direction of the barn, he noticed, but not dead on.)

He said, “Hi, Dad. Hello, sir.”

The Industrialist said, “Just a moment, Red. I have a question to ask you?”

Red turned a carefully blank face to his father. “Yes, Dad?”

“Mother tells me you were out early this morning.”

“Not real early, Dad. Just a little before breakfast.”

“She said you told her it was because you had been awakened during the night and didn’t go back to sleep.”

Red waited before answering. Should he have told Mom that?

Then he said, “Yes, sir.”

“What was it that awakened you?”

Red saw no harm in it. He said, “I don’t know, Dad. It sounded like thunder, sort of, and like a collision, sort of.”

“Could you tell where it came from?”

“It *sounded* like it was out by the hill.” That was truthful, and useful as well, since the direction was almost opposite that in which the barn lay.

The Industrialist looked at his guest. “I suppose it would do no harm to walk toward the hill.”

The Astronomer said, “I am ready.”

Red watched them walk away and when he turned he saw Slim peering cautiously out from among the briars of a hedge.

Red waved at him. “Come on.”

Slim stepped out and approached. “Did they say anything about the meat?”

“No. I guess they don’t know about that. They went down to the hill.”

“What for?”

“Search me. They kept asking about the noise I heard. Listen, did the animals eat the meat?”

“Well,” said Slim, cautiously, “they were sort of *looking*at it and smelling it or something.”

“Okay,” Red said, “I guess they’ll eat it. Holy Smokes, they’ve got to eat *something*. Let’s walk along toward the hill and see what Dad and your father are going to do.”

“What about the animals?”

“They’ll be all right. A fellow can’t spend all his time on them. Did you give them water?”

“Sure. They drank that.”

“See. Come on. We’ll look at them after lunch. I tell you what. We’ll bring them fruit. Anything’ll eat fruit.”

Together they trotted up the rise, Red, as usual, in the lead.

CHAPTER V

The Astronomer said, “You think the noise was their ship landing?”

“Don’t you think it could be?”

“If it were, they may all be dead.”

“Perhaps not.” The Industrialist frowned.

“If they have landed, and are still alive, where are they?”

“Think about that for a while.” He was still frowning.

The Astronomer said, “I don’t understand you.”

“They may not be friendly.”

“Oh, no. I’ve spoken with them. They’ve—”

“You’ve spoken with them. Call that reconnaissance. What would their next step be? Invasion?”

“But they only have one ship, sir.”

“You know that only because they say so. They might have a fleet.”

“I’ve told you about their size. They—”

“Their size would not matter, if they have handweapons that may well be superior to our artillery.”

“That is not what I meant.”

“I had this partly in mind from the first.” The Industrialist went on. “It is for that reason I agreed to see them after I received your letter. Not to agree to an unsettling and impossible trade, but to judge their real purposes. I did not count on their evading the meeting.”

He sighed. “I suppose it isn’t our fault. You are right in one thing, at any rate. The world has been at peace too long. We are losing a healthy sense of suspicion.”

The Astronomer’s mild voice rose to an unusual pitch and he said, “I *will* speak. I tell you that there is no reason to suppose they can possibly be hostile. They are small, yes, but that is only important because it is a reflection of the fact that their native worlds are small. Our world has what is for them a normal gravity, but because of our much higher gravitational potential, our atmosphere is too dense to support them comfortably over sustained periods. For a similar reason the use of the world as a base for interstellar travel, except for trade in certain items, is uneconomical. And there are important differences in chemistry of life due to the basic differences in soils. They couldn’t eat our food or we theirs.”

“Surely all this can be overcome. They can bring their own food, build domed stations of lowered air pressure, devise specially designed ships.”

“They can. And how glibly you can describe feats that are easy to

a race in its youth. It is simply that they don't have to do any of that. There are millions of worlds suitable for them in the Galaxy. They don't need this one which isn't."

"How do you know? All this is their information again."

"This I was able to check independently. I am an astronomer, after all."

"That is true. Let me hear what you have to say then, while we walk."

"Then, sir, consider that for a long time our astronomers have believed that two general classes of planetary bodies existed. First, the planets which formed at distances far enough from their stellar nucleus to become cool enough to capture hydrogen. These would be large planets rich in hydrogen, ammonia and methane. We have examples of these in the giant outer planets. The second class would include those planets formed so near the stellar center that the high temperature would make it impossible to capture much hydrogen. These would be smaller planets, comparatively poorer in hydrogen and richer in oxygen. We know that type very well since we live on one. Ours is the only solar system we know in detail, however, and it has been reasonable for us to assume that these were the *only* two planetary classes."

"I take it then that there is another."

"Yes. There is a super-dense class, still smaller, poorer in hydrogen, than the inner planets of the solar system. The ratio of occurrence of hydrogen-ammonia planets and these super-dense water-oxygen worlds of theirs over the entire Galaxy—and remember that they have actually conducted a survey of significant sample volumes of the Galaxy which we, without interstellar travel, cannot do—is about 3 to 1. This leaves them seven million super-dense worlds for exploration and colonization."

The Industrialist looked at the blue sky and the green-covered trees among which they were making their way. He said, "And worlds like ours?"

The Astronomer said, softly, "Ours is the first solar system they have found which contains them. Apparently the development of our solar system was unique and did not follow the ordinary rules."

The Industrialist considered that. "What it amounts to is that these creatures from space are asteroid-dwellers."

"No, no. The asteroids are something else again. They occur, I was told, in one out of eight stellar systems, but they're completely different from what we've been discussing."

"And how does your being an astronomer change the fact that you are still only quoting their unsupported statements?"

"But they did not restrict themselves to bald items of information.

They presented me with a theory of stellar evolution which I had to accept and which is more nearly valid than anything our own astronomy has ever been able to devise, if we except possible lost theories dating from Beforethewars. Mind you, their theory had a rigidly mathematical development and it predicted just such a Galaxy as they describe. So you see, they have all the worlds they wish. They are not land-hungry. Certainly not for our land."

"Reason would say so, if what you say is true. But creatures may be intelligent and not reasonable. Our forefathers were presumably intelligent, yet they were certainly not reasonable. Was it reasonable to destroy almost all their tremendous civilization in atomic warfare over causes our historians can no longer accurately determine?" The Industrialist brooded over it. "From the dropping of the first atom bomb over those islands—I forget the ancient name—there was only one end in sight, and in plain sight. Yet events were allowed to proceed to that end."

He looked up, said briskly, "Well, where are we? I wonder if we are not on a fool's errand after all."

But the Astronomer was a little in advance and his voice came thickly. "No fool's errand, sir. Look there."

CHAPTER VI

Red and Slim had trailed their elders with the experience of youth, aided by the absorption and anxiety of their fathers. Their view of the final object of the search was somewhat obscured by the underbrush behind which they remained.

Red said, “Holy Smokes. Look at that. It’s all shiny silver or something.”

But it was Slim who was really excited. He caught at the other. “I know what this is. It’s a space-ship. That must be why my father came here. He’s one of the biggest astronomers in the world and your father would have to call him if a space-ship landed on his estate.”

“What are you talking about? Dad didn’t even know that thing was there. He only came here because I told him I heard the thunder from here. Besides, there isn’t any such thing as a space-ship.”

“Sure, there is. Look at it. See those round things. They are ports. And you can see the rocket tubes.”

“How do you know so much?”

Slim was flushed. He said, “I read about them. My father has books about them. Old books. From Beforethewars.”

“Huh. Now I know you’re making it up. Books from Beforethewars!”

“My father *has* to have them. He teaches at the University. It’s his job.”

His voice had risen and Red had to pull at him. “You want them to hear us?” he whispered indignantly.

“Well, it is, too, a space-ship.”

“Look here, Slim, you mean that’s a ship from another world.”

“It’s *got* to be. Look at my father going round and round it. He wouldn’t be so interested if it was anything else.”

“Other worlds! Where are there other worlds?”

“Everywhere. How about the planets? They’re worlds just like ours, some of them. And other stars probably have planets. There’s probably zillions of planets.”

Red felt outweighed and outnumbered. He muttered, “You’re crazy!”

“All right, then. I’ll show you.”

“Hey! Where are you going?”

“Down there. I’m going to ask my father. I suppose you’ll believe it if *he* tells you. I suppose you’ll believe a Professor of Astronomy knows what—”

He had scrambled upright.

Red said, “Hey. You don’t want them to see us. We’re not

supposed to be here. Do you want them to start asking questions and find out about our animals?"

"I don't care. You said I was crazy."

"Snitcher! You promised you wouldn't tell."

"I'm *not* going to tell. But if they find out themselves, it's your fault, for starting an argument and saying I was crazy."

"I take it back, then," grumbled Red.

"Well, all right. You better."

In a way, Slim was disappointed. He wanted to see the space-ship at closer quarters. Still, he could not break his vow of secrecy even in spirit without at least the excuse of personal insult.

Red said, "It's awfully small for a space-ship."

"Sure, because it's probably a scout-ship."

"I'll bet Dad couldn't even get into the old thing."

So much Slim realized to be true. It was a weak point in his argument and he made no answer. His interest was absorbed by the adults.

Red rose to his feet; an elaborate attitude of boredom all about him. "Well, I guess we better be going. There's business to do and I can't spend all day here looking at some old space-ship or whatever it is. We've got to take care of the animals if we're going to be circus-folks. That's the first rule with circus-folks. They've got to take care of the animals. And," he finished virtuously, "that's what I aim to do, anyway."

Slim said, "What for, Red? They've got plenty of meat. Let's watch."

"There's no fun in watching. Besides Dad and your father are going away and I guess it's about lunch time."

Red became argumentative. "Look, Slim, we can't start acting suspicious or they're going to start investigating. Holy Smokes, don't you ever read any detective stories? When you're trying to work a big deal without being caught, it's practically the main thing to keep on acting just like always. Then they don't suspect anything. That's the first law—"

"Oh, all right."

Slim rose resentfully. At the moment, the circus appeared to him a rather tawdry and shoddy substitute for the glories of astronomy, and he wondered how he had come to fall in with Red's silly scheme.

Down the slope they went, Slim, as usual, in the rear.

CHAPTER VII

The Industrialist said, “It’s the workmanship that gets me. I never saw such construction.”

“What good is it now?” said the Astronomer, bitterly. “There’s nothing left. There’ll be no second landing. This ship detected life on our planet through accident. Other exploring parties would come no closer than necessary to establish the fact that there were no super-dense worlds existing in our solar system.”

“Well, there’s no quarreling with a crash landing.”

“The ship hardly seems damaged. If only some had survived, the ship might have been repaired.”

“If they had survived, there would be no trade in any case. They’re too different. Too disturbing. In any case—it’s over.”

They entered the house and the Industrialist greeted his wife calmly. “Lunch about ready, dear.”

“I’m afraid not. You see—” She looked hesitantly at the Astronomer.

“Is anything wrong?” asked the Industrialist. “Why not tell me? I’m sure our guest won’t mind a little family discussion.”

“Pray don’t pay any attention whatever to me,” muttered the Astronomer. He moved miserably to the other end of the living room.

The woman said, in low, hurried tones, “Really, dear, cook’s that upset. I’ve been soothing her for hours and honestly, I don’t know why Red should have done it.”

“Done what?” The Industrialist was more amused than otherwise. It had taken the united efforts of himself and his son months to argue his wife into using the name “Red” rather than the perfectly ridiculous (viewed youngster fashion) name which was his real one.

She said, “He’s taken most of the chopped meat.”

“He’s eaten it?”

“Well, I hope not. It was raw.”

“Then what would he want it for?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea. I haven’t seen him since breakfast. Meanwhile cook’s just furious. She caught him vanishing out the kitchen door and there was the bowl of chopped meat just about empty and she was going to use it for lunch. Well, you know cook. She had to change the lunch menu and that means she won’t be worth living with for a week. You’ll just have to speak to Red, dear, and make him promise not to do things in the kitchen any more. And it wouldn’t hurt to have him apologize to cook.”

“Oh, come. She works for us. If we don’t complain about a change in lunch menu, why should she?”

"Because she's the one who has double-work made for her, and she's talking about quitting. Good cooks aren't easy to get. Do you remember the one before her?"

It was a strong argument.

The Industrialist looked about vaguely. He said, "I suppose you're right. He isn't here, I suppose. When he comes in, I'll talk to him."

"You'd better start. Here he comes."

Red walked into the house and said cheerfully, "Time for lunch, I guess." He looked from one parent to the other in quick speculation at their fixed stares and said, "Got to clean up first, though," and made for the other door.

The Industrialist said, "One moment, son."

"Sir?"

"Where's your little friend?"

Red said, carelessly, "He's around somewhere. We were just sort of walking and I looked around and he wasn't there." This was perfectly true, and Red felt on safe ground. "I told him it was lunch time. I said, 'I suppose it's about lunch time.' I said, 'We got to be getting back to the house.' And he said, 'Yes.' And I just went on and then when I was about at the creek I looked around and—"

The Astronomer interrupted the voluble story, looking up from a magazine he had been sightlessly rummaging through. "I wouldn't worry about my youngster. He is quite self-reliant. Don't wait lunch for him."

"Lunch isn't ready in any case, Doctor." The Industrialist turned once more to his son. "And talking about that, son, the reason for it is that something happened to the ingredients. Do you have anything to say?"

"Sir?"

"I hate to feel that I have to explain myself more fully. Why did you take the chopped meat?"

"The chopped meat?"

"The chopped meat." He waited patiently.

Red said, "Well, I was sort of—"

"Hungry?" prompted his father. "For raw meat?"

"No, sir. I just sort of needed it."

"For what exactly?"

Red looked miserable and remained silent.

The Astronomer broke in again. "If you don't mind my putting in a few words—You'll remember that just after breakfast my son came in to ask what animals ate."

"Oh, you're right. How stupid of me to forget. Look here, Red, did you take it for an animal pet you've got?"

Red recovered indignant breath. He said, "You mean Slim came in

here and said I had an animal? He came in here and said that? He said I had an animal?"

"No, he didn't. He simply asked what animals ate. That's all. Now if he promised he wouldn't tell on you, he didn't. It's your own foolishness in trying to take something without permission that gave you away. That happened to be stealing. Now have you an animal? I ask you a direct question."

"Yes, sir." It was a whisper so low as hardly to be heard.

"All right, you'll have to get rid of it. Do you understand?"

Red's mother intervened. "Do you mean to say you're keeping a meat-eating animal, Red? It might bite you and give you blood-poison."

"They're only small ones," quavered Red. "They hardly budge if you touch them."

"They? How many do you have?"

"Two."

"Where are they?"

The Industrialist touched her arm. "Don't chivvy the child any further," he said, in a low voice. "If he says he'll get rid of them, he will, and that's punishment enough."

He dismissed the matter from his mind.

CHAPTER VIII

Lunch was half over when Slim dashed into the dining room. For a moment, he stood abashed, and then he said in what was almost hysteria, “I’ve got to speak to Red. I’ve got to say something.”

Red looked up in fright, but the Astronomer said, “I don’t think, son, you’re being very polite. You’ve kept lunch waiting.”

“I’m sorry, Father.”

“Oh, don’t rate the lad,” said the Industrialist’s wife. “He can speak to Red if he wants to, and there was no damage done to the lunch.”

“I’ve got to speak to Red alone,” Slim insisted.

“Now that’s enough,” said the Astronomer with a kind of gentleness that was obviously manufactured for the benefit of strangers and which had beneath it an easily-recognized edge. “Take your seat.”

Slim did so, but he ate only when someone looked directly upon him. Even then he was not very successful.

Red caught his eyes. He made soundless words, “Did the animals get loose?”

Slim shook his head slightly. He whispered, “No, it’s—”

The Astronomer looked at him hard and Slim faltered to a stop.

With lunch over, Red slipped out of the room, with a microscopic motion at Slim to follow.

They walked in silence to the creek.

Then Red turned fiercely upon his companion. “Look here, what’s the idea of telling my Dad we were feeding animals?”

Slim said, “I didn’t. I asked what you feed animals. That’s not the same as saying we were doing it. Besides, it’s something else, Red.”

But Red had not used up his grievances. “And where did you go anyway? I thought you were coming to the house. They acted like it was my fault you weren’t there.”

“But I’m trying to tell you about that, if you’d only shut*up* a second and let me talk. You don’t give a fellow a chance.”

“Well, go on and tell me if you’ve got so much to say.”

“I’m *trying* to. I went back to the space-ship. The folks weren’t there anymore and I wanted to see what it was like.”

“It isn’t a space-ship,” said Red, sullenly. He had nothing to lose.

“It is, too. I looked inside. You could look through the ports and I looked inside and they were *dead*.” He looked sick. “They were dead.”

“*Who* were dead.”

Slim screeched, “Animals! like *our* animals! Only they*aren’t* animals. They’re people-things from other planets.”

For a moment Red might have been turned to stone. It didn't occur to him to disbelieve Slim at this point. Slim looked too genuinely the bearer of just such tidings. He said, finally, "Oh, my."

"Well, what are we going to do? Golly, will we get a whopping if they find out?" He was shivering.

"We better turn them loose," said Red.

"They'll tell on us."

"They can't talk our language. Not if they're from another planet."

"Yes, they can. Because I remember my father talking about some stuff like that to my mother when he didn't know I was in the room. He was talking about visitors who could talk with the mind. Telepathery or something. I thought he was making it up."

"Well, Holy Smokes. I mean—Holy Smokes." Red looked up. "I tell you. My Dad said to get rid of them. Let's sort of bury them somewhere or throw them in the creek."

"He *told* you to do that."

"He made me say I had animals and then he said, 'Get rid of them.' I got to do what he says. Holy Smokes, he's my Dad."

Some of the panic left Slim's heart. It was a thoroughly legalistic way out. "Well, let's do it right now, then, before they find out. Oh, golly, if they find out, will we be in trouble!"

They broke into a run toward the barn, unspeakable visions in their minds.

CHAPTER IX

It was different, looking at them as though they were "people." As animals, they had been interesting; as "people," horrible. Their eyes, which were neutral little objects before, now seemed to watch them with active malevolence.

"They're making noises," said Slim, in a whisper which was barely audible.

"I guess they're talking or something," said Red. Funny that those noises which they had heard before had not had significance earlier. He was making no move toward them. Neither was Slim.

The canvas was off but they were just watching. The ground meat, Slim noticed, hadn't been touched.

Slim said, "Aren't you going to do something?"

"Aren't you?"

"You found them."

"It's your turn, now."

"No, it isn't. You found them. It's your fault, the whole thing. I was watching."

"You joined in, Slim. You know you did."

"I don't care. You found them and that's what I'll say when they come here looking for us."

Red said, "All right for you." But the thought of the consequences inspired him anyway, and he reached for the cage door.

Slim said, "Wait!"

Red was glad to. He said, "Now what's biting you?"

"One of them's got something on him that looks like it might be iron or something."

"Where?"

"Right there. I saw it before but I thought it was just part of him. But if he's 'people,' maybe it's a disintegrator gun."

"What's that?"

"I read about it in the books from Beforethewars. Mostly people with space-ships have disintegrator guns. They point them at you and you get disintegratored."

"They didn't point it at us till now," pointed out Red with his heart not quite in it.

"I don't care. I'm not hanging around here and getting disintegratored. I'm getting my father."

"Cowardy-cat. Yellow cowardy-cat."

"I don't care. You can call all the names you want, but if you bother them now you'll get disintegratored. You wait and see, and it'll be all your fault."

He made for the narrow spiral stairs that led to the main floor of the barn, stopped at its head, then backed away.

Red's mother was moving up, panting a little with the exertion and smiling a tight smile for the benefit of Slim in his capacity as guest.

"Red! You, Red! Are you up there? Now don't try to hide. I know this is where you're keeping them. Cook saw where you ran with the meat."

Red quavered, "Hello, ma!"

"Now show me those nasty animals? I'm going to see to it that you get rid of them right away."

It was over! And despite the imminent corporal punishment, Red felt something like a load fall from him. At least the decision was out of his hands.

"Right there, ma. I didn't do anything to them, ma. I didn't know. They just looked like little animals and I thought you'd let me keep them, ma. I wouldn't have taken the meat only they wouldn't eat grass or leaves and we couldn't find good nuts or berries and cook never lets me have anything or I would have asked her and I didn't know it was for lunch and—"

He was speaking on the sheer momentum of terror and did not realize that his mother did not hear him but, with eyes frozen and popping at the cage, was screaming in thin, piercing tones.

CHAPTER X

The Astronomer was saying, “A quiet burial is all we can do. There is no point in any publicity now,” when they heard the screams.

She had not entirely recovered by the time she reached them, running and running. It was minutes before her husband could extract sense from her.

She was saying, finally, “I tell you they’re in the barn. I don’t know what they are. No, no—”

She barred the Industrialist’s quick movement in that direction. She said, “Don’t*you* go. Send one of the hands with a shotgun. I tell you I never saw anything like it. Little horrible beasts with—with—I can’t describe it. To think that Red was touching them and trying to feed them. He was *holding* them, and feeding them meat.”

Red began, “I only—”

And Slim said, “It was not—”

The Industrialist said, quickly, “Now you boys have done enough harm today. March! Into the house! And not a word; not one word! I’m not interested in anything you have to say. After this is all over, I’ll hear you out and as for you, Red, I’ll see that you’re properly punished.”

He turned to his wife. “Now whatever the animals are, we’ll have them killed.” He added quietly once the youngsters were out of hearing, “Come, come. The children aren’t hurt and, after all, they haven’t done anything really terrible. They’ve just found a new pet.”

The Astronomer spoke with difficulty. “Pardon me, ma’am, but can you describe these animals?”

She shook her head. She was quite beyond words.

“Can you just tell me if they—”

“I’m sorry,” said the Industrialist, apologetically, “but I think I had better take care of her. Will you excuse me?”

“A moment. Please. One moment. She said she had never seen such animals before. Surely it is not usual to find animals that are completely unique on an estate such as this.”

“I’m sorry. Let’s not discuss that now.”

“Except that unique animals might have landed during the night.”

The Industrialist stepped away from his wife. “What are you implying?”

“I think we had better go to the barn, sir!”

The Industrialist stared a moment, turned and suddenly and quite uncharacteristically began running. The Astronomer followed and the woman’s wail rose unheeded behind them.

CHAPTER XI

The Industrialist stared, looked at the Astronomer, turned to stare again.

"Those?"

"Those," said the Astronomer. "I have no doubt we appear strange and repulsive to them."

"What do they say?"

"Why, that they are uncomfortable and tired and even a little sick, but that they are not seriously damaged, and that the youngsters treated them well."

"Treated them well! Scooping them up, keeping them in a cage, giving them grass and raw meat to eat? Tell me how to speak to them."

"It may take a little time. Think *at* them. Try to listen. It will come to you, but perhaps not right away."

The Industrialist tried. He grimaced with the effort of it, thinking over and over again, "The youngsters were ignorant of your identity."

And the thought was suddenly in his mind: "We were quite aware of it and because we knew they meant well by us according to their own view of the matter, we did not attempt to attack them."

"Attack them?" thought the Industrialist, and said it aloud in his concentration.

"Why, yes," came the answering thought. "We are armed."

One of the revolting little creatures in the cage lifted a metal object and there was a sudden hole in the top of the cage and another in the roof of the barn, each hole rimmed with charred wood.

"We hope," the creatures thought, "it will not be too difficult to make repairs."

The Industrialist found it impossible to organize himself to the point of directed thought. He turned to the Astronomer. "And with that weapon in their possession they let themselves be handled and caged? I don't understand it."

But the calm thought came, "We would not harm the young of an intelligent species."

CHAPTER XII

It was twilight. The Industrialist had entirely missed the evening meal and remained unaware of the fact.

He said, “Do you really think the ship will fly?”

“If they say so,” said the Astronomer, “I’m sure it will. They’ll be back, I hope, before too long.”

“And when they do,” said the Industrialist, energetically, “I will keep my part of the agreement. What is more I will move sky and earth to have the world accept them. I was entirely wrong, Doctor. Creatures that would refuse to harm children, under such provocation as they received, are admirable. But you know—I almost hate to say this—”

“Say what?”

“The kids. Yours and mine. I’m almost proud of them. Imagine seizing these creatures, feeding them or trying to, and keeping them hidden. The amazing gall of it. Red told me it was his idea to get a job in a circus on the strength of them. Imagine!”

The Astronomer said, “Youth!”

CHAPTER XIII

The Merchant said, “Will we be taking off soon?”

“Half an hour,” said the Explorer.

It was going to be a lonely trip back. All the remaining seventeen of the crew were dead and their ashes were to be left on a strange planet. Back they would go with a limping ship and the burden of the controls entirely on himself.

The Merchant said, “It was a good business stroke, not harming the young ones. We will get very good terms; *very*good terms.”

The Explorer thought: Business!

The Merchant then said, “They’ve lined up to see us off. All of them. You don’t think they’re too close, do you? It would be bad to burn any of them with the rocket blast at this stage of the game.”

“They’re safe.”

“Horrible-looking things, aren’t they?”

“Pleasant enough, inside. Their thoughts are perfectly friendly.”

“You wouldn’t believe it of them. That immature one, the one that first picked us up—”

“They call him Red,” provided the Explorer.

“That’s a queer name for a monster. Makes me laugh. He actually feels *bad* that we’re leaving. Only I can’t make out exactly why. The nearest I can come to it is something about a lost opportunity with some organization or other that I can’t quite interpret.”

“A circus,” said the Explorer, briefly.

“What? Why, the impertinent monstrosity.”

“Why not? What would you have done if you had found*him* wandering on *your* native world; found him sleeping on a field on Earth, red tentacles, six legs, pseudopods and all?”

CHAPTER XIV

Red watched the ship leave. His red tentacles, which gave him his nickname, quivered their regret at lost opportunity to the very last, and the eyes at their tips filled with drifting yellowish crystals that were the equivalent of Earthly tears.

ANTHEM, by Ayn Rand

CHAPTER ONE

It is a sin to write this. It is a sin to think words no others think and to put them down upon a paper no others are to see. It is base and evil. It is as if we were speaking alone to no ears but our own. And we know well that there is no transgression blacker than to do or think alone. We have broken the laws. The laws say that men may not write unless the Council of Vocations bid them so. May we be forgiven!

But this is not the only sin upon us. We have committed a greater crime, and for this crime there is no name. What punishment awaits us if it be discovered we know not, for no such crime has come in the memory of men and there are no laws to provide for it.

It is dark here. The flame of the candle stands still in the air. Nothing moves in this tunnel save our hand on the paper. We are alone here under the earth. It is a fearful word, alone. The laws say that none among men may be alone, ever and at any time, for this is the great transgression and the root of all evil. But we have broken many laws. And now there is nothing here save our one body, and it is strange to see only two legs stretched on the ground, and on the wall before us the shadow of our one head.

The walls are cracked and water runs upon them in thin threads without sound, black and glistening as blood. We stole the candle from the larder of the Home of the Street Sweepers. We shall be sentenced to ten years in the Palace of Corrective Detention if it be discovered. But this matters not. It matters only that the light is precious and we should not waste it to write when we need it for that work which is our crime. Nothing matters save the work, our secret, our evil, our precious work. Still, we must also write, for—may the Council have mercy upon us!—we wish to speak for once to no ears but our own.

Our name is Equality 7-2521, as it is written on the iron bracelet which all men wear on their left wrists with their names upon it. We are twenty-one years old. We are six feet tall, and this is a burden, for there are not many men who are six feet tall. Ever have the Teachers and the Leaders pointed to us and frowned and said: “There is evil in your bones, Equality 7-2521, for your body has grown beyond the bodies of your brothers.” But we cannot change our bones nor our body.

We were born with a curse. It has always driven us to thoughts which are forbidden. It has always given us wishes which men may not wish. We know that we are evil, but there is no will in us and no power to resist it. This is our wonder and our secret fear, that we know and do not resist.

We strive to be like all our brother men, for all men must be alike. Over the portals of the Palace of the World Council, there are words cut in the marble, which we are required to repeat to ourselves whenever we are tempted:

> "We are one in all and all in one.
> There are no men but only the great WE,
> One, indivisible and forever."—

We repeat this to ourselves, but it helps us not.

These words were cut long ago. There is green mould in the grooves of the letters and yellow streaks on the marble, which come from more years than men could count. And these words are the truth, for they are written on the Palace of the World Council, and the World Council is the body of all truth. Thus has it been ever since the Great Rebirth, and farther back than that no memory can reach.

But we must never speak of the times before the Great Rebirth, else we are sentenced to three years in the Palace of Corrective Detention. It is only the Old Ones who whisper about it in the evenings, in the Home of the Useless. They whisper many strange things, of the towers which rose to the sky, in those Unmentionable Times, and of the wagons which moved without horses, and of the lights which burned without flame. But those times were evil. And those times passed away, when men saw the Great Truth which is this: that all men are one and that there is no will save the will of all men together.

All men are good and wise. It is only we, Equality 7-2521, we alone who were born with a curse. For we are not like our brothers. And as we look back upon our life, we see that it has ever been thus and that it has brought us step by step to our last, supreme transgression, our crime of crimes hidden here under the ground.

We remember the Home of the Infants where we lived till we were five years old, together with all the children of the City who had been born in the same year. The sleeping halls there were white and clean and bare of all things save one hundred beds. We were just like all our brothers then, save for the one transgression: we fought with our brothers. There are few offenses blacker than to fight with our brothers, at any age and for any cause whatsoever. The Council of the Home told us so, and of all the children of that year, we were locked in the cellar most often.

When we were five years old, we were sent to the Home of the Students, where there are ten wards, for our ten years of learning. Men must learn till they reach their fifteenth year. Then they go to work. In the Home of the Students we arose when the big bell rang in

the tower and we went to our beds when it rang again. Before we removed our garments, we stood in the great sleeping hall, and we raised our right arms, and we said all together with the three Teachers at the head:

"We are nothing. Mankind is all. By the grace of our brothers are we allowed our lives. We exist through, by and for our brothers who are the State. Amen."

Then we slept. The sleeping halls were white and clean and bare of all things save one hundred beds.

We, Equality 7-2521, were not happy in those years in the Home of the Students. It was not that the learning was too hard for us. It was that the learning was too easy. This is a great sin, to be born with a head which is too quick. It is not good to be different from our brothers, but it is evil to be superior to them. The Teachers told us so, and they frowned when they looked upon us.

So we fought against this curse. We tried to forget our lessons, but we always remembered. We tried not to understand what the Teachers taught, but we always understood it before the Teachers had spoken. We looked upon Union 5-3992, who were a pale boy with only half a brain, and we tried to say and do as they did, that we might be like them, like Union 5-3992, but somehow the Teachers knew that we were not. And we were lashed more often than all the other children.

The Teachers were just, for they had been appointed by the Councils, and the Councils are the voice of all justice, for they are the voice of all men. And if sometimes, in the secret darkness of our heart, we regret that which befell us on our fifteenth birthday, we know that it was through our own guilt. We had broken a law, for we had not paid heed to the words of our Teachers. The Teachers had said to us all:

"Dare not choose in your minds the work you would like to do when you leave the Home of the Students. You shall do what the Council of Vocations shall prescribe for you. For the Council of Vocations knows in its great wisdom where you are needed by your brother men, better than you can know it in your unworthy little minds. And if you are not needed by your brother men, there is no reason for you to burden the earth with your bodies."

We knew this well, in the years of our childhood, but our curse broke our will. We were guilty and we confess it here: we were guilty of the great Transgression of Preference. We preferred some work and some lessons to the others. We did not listen well to the history of all the Councils elected since the Great Rebirth. But we loved the Science of Things. We wished to know. We wished to know about all the things which make the earth around us. We asked so many questions that the Teachers forbade it.

We think that there are mysteries in the sky and under the water and in the plants which grow. But the Council of Scholars has said that there are no mysteries, and the Council of Scholars knows all things. And we learned much from our Teachers. We learned that the earth is flat and that the sun revolves around it, which causes the day and night. We learned the names of all the winds which blow over the seas and push the sails of our great ships. We learned how to bleed men to cure them of all ailments.

We loved the Science of Things. And in the darkness, in the secret hour, when we awoke in the night and there were no brothers around us, but only their shapes in the beds and their snores, we closed our eyes, and we held our lips shut, and we stopped our breath, that no shudder might let our brothers see or hear or guess, and we thought that we wished to be sent to the Home of the Scholars when our time would come.

All of the great modern inventions come from the Home of the Scholars, such as the newest one, which was found only a hundred years ago, of how to make candles from wax and string; also, how to make glass, which is put in our windows to protect us from the rain. To find these things, the Scholars must study the earth and learn from the rivers, from the sands, from the winds and the rocks. And if we went to the Home of the Scholars, we could learn from these also. We could ask questions of these, for they do not forbid questions.

And questions give us no rest. We know not why our curse makes us seek we know not what, ever and ever. But we cannot resist it. It whispers to us that there are great things on this earth of ours, and that we must know them. We ask, why must we know, but it has no answer to give us. We must know that we may know.

So we wished to be sent to the Home of the Scholars. We wished it so much that our hands trembled under the blankets in the night, and we bit our arm to stop that other pain which we could not endure. It was evil and we dared not face our brothers in the morning. For men may wish nothing for themselves. And we were punished when the Council of Vocations came to give us our life Mandates which tell those who reach their fifteenth year what their work is to be for the rest of their days.

The Council of Vocations came in on the first day of spring, and they sat in the great hall. And we who were fifteen and all the Teachers came into the great hall. And the Council of Vocations sat on a high dais, and they had but two words to speak to each of the Students. They called the Students' names, and when the Students stepped before them, one after another, the Council said: "Carpenter" or "Doctor" or "Cook" or "Leader." Then each Student raised their right arm and said: "The will of our brothers be done."

Now if the Council said “Carpenter” or “Cook,” the Students so assigned go to work and do not study any further. But if the Council has said “Leader,” then those Students go into the Home of the Leaders, which is the greatest house in the City, for it has three stories. And there they study for many years, so that they may become candidates and be elected to the City Council and the State Council and the World Council—by a free and general vote of all men. But we wished not to be a Leader, even though it is a great honor. We wished to be a Scholar.

So we awaited our turn in the great hall and then we heard the Council of Vocations call our name: “Equality 7-2521.” We walked to the dais, and our legs did not tremble, and we looked up at the Council. There were five members of the Council, three of the male gender and two of the female. Their hair was white and their faces were cracked as the clay of a dry river bed. They were old. They seemed older than the marble of the Temple of the World Council. They sat before us and they did not move. And we saw no breath to stir the folds of their white togas. But we knew that they were alive, for a finger of the hand of the oldest rose, pointed to us, and fell down again. This was the only thing which moved, for the lips of the oldest did not move as they said: “Street Sweeper.”

We felt the cords of our neck grow tight as our head rose higher to look upon the faces of the Council, and we were happy. We knew we had been guilty, but now we had a way to atone for it. We would accept our Life Mandate, and we would work for our brothers, gladly and willingly, and we would erase our sin against them, which they did not know, but we knew. So we were happy, and proud of ourselves and of our victory over ourselves. We raised our right arm and we spoke, and our voice was the clearest, the steadiest voice in the hall that day, and we said:

“The will of our brothers be done.”

And we looked straight into the eyes of the Council, but their eyes were as cold as blue glass buttons.

So we went into the Home of the Street Sweepers. It is a grey house on a narrow street. There is a sundial in its courtyard, by which the Council of the Home can tell the hours of the day and when to ring the bell. When the bell rings, we all arise from our beds. The sky is green and cold in our windows to the east. The shadow on the sundial marks off a half-hour while we dress and eat our breakfast in the dining hall, where there are five long tables with twenty clay plates and twenty clay cups on each table. Then we go to work in the streets of the City, with our brooms and our rakes. In five hours, when the sun is high, we return to the Home and we eat our midday meal, for which one-half hour is allowed. Then we go to work again. In five

hours, the shadows are blue on the pavements, and the sky is blue with a deep brightness which is not bright. We come back to have our dinner, which lasts one hour. Then the bell rings and we walk in a straight column to one of the City Halls, for the Social Meeting. Other columns of men arrive from the Homes of the different Trades. The candles are lit, and the Councils of the different Homes stand in a pulpit, and they speak to us of our duties and of our brother men. Then visiting Leaders mount the pulpit and they read to us the speeches which were made in the City Council that day, for the City Council represents all men and all men must know. Then we sing hymns, the Hymn of Brotherhood, and the Hymn of Equality, and the Hymn of the Collective Spirit. The sky is a soggy purple when we return to the Home. Then the bell rings and we walk in a straight column to the City Theatre for three hours of Social Recreation. There a play is shown upon the stage, with two great choruses from the Home of the Actors, which speak and answer all together, in two great voices. The plays are about toil and how good it is. Then we walk back to the Home in a straight column. The sky is like a black sieve pierced by silver drops that tremble, ready to burst through. The moths beat against the street lanterns. We go to our beds and we sleep, till the bell rings again. The sleeping halls are white and clean and bare of all things save one hundred beds.

Thus have we lived each day of four years, until two springs ago when our crime happened. Thus must all men live until they are forty. At forty, they are worn out. At forty, they are sent to the Home of the Useless, where the Old Ones live. The Old Ones do not work, for the State takes care of them. They sit in the sun in summer and they sit by the fire in winter. They do not speak often, for they are weary. The Old Ones know that they are soon to die. When a miracle happens and some live to be forty-five, they are the Ancient Ones, and children stare at them when passing by the Home of the Useless. Such is to be our life, as that of all our brothers and of the brothers who came before us.

Such would have been our life, had we not committed our crime which has changed all things for us. And it was our curse which drove us to our crime. We had been a good Street Sweeper and like all our brother Street Sweepers, save for our cursed wish to know. We looked too long at the stars at night, and at the trees and the earth. And when we cleaned the yard of the Home of the Scholars, we gathered the glass vials, the pieces of metal, the dried bones which they had discarded. We wished to keep these things and to study them, but we had no place to hide them. So we carried them to the City Cesspool. And then we made the discovery.

It was on a day of the spring before last. We Street Sweepers work

in brigades of three, and we were with Union 5-3992, they of the half-brain, and with International 4-8818. Now Union 5-3992 are a sickly lad and sometimes they are stricken with convulsions, when their mouth froths and their eyes turn white. But International 4-8818 are different. They are a tall, strong youth and their eyes are like fireflies, for there is laughter in their eyes. We cannot look upon International 4-8818 and not smile in answer. For this they were not liked in the Home of the Students, as it is not proper to smile without reason. And also they were not liked because they took pieces of coal and they drew pictures upon the walls, and they were pictures which made men laugh. But it is only our brothers in the Home of the Artists who are permitted to draw pictures, so International 4-8818 were sent to the Home of the Street Sweepers, like ourselves.

International 4-8818 and we are friends. This is an evil thing to say, for it is a great transgression, the great Transgression of Preference, to love any among men better than the others, since we must love all men and all men are our friends. So International 4-8818 and we have never spoken of it. But we know. We know, when we look into each other's eyes. And when we look thus without words, we both know other things also, strange things for which there are no words, and these things frighten us.

So on that day of the spring before last, Union 5-3992 were stricken with convulsions on the edge of the City, near the City Theatre. We left them to lie in the shade of the Theatre tent and we went with International 4-8818 to finish our work. We came together to the great ravine behind the Theatre. It is empty save for trees and weeds. Beyond the ravine there is a plain, and beyond the plain there lies the Uncharted Forest, about which men must not think.

We were gathering the papers and the rags which the wind had blown from the Theatre, when we saw an iron bar among the weeds. It was old and rusted by many rains. We pulled with all our strength, but we could not move it. So we called International 4-8818, and together we scraped the earth around the bar. Of a sudden the earth fell in before us, and we saw an old iron grill over a black hole.

International 4-8818 stepped back. But we pulled at the grill and it gave way. And then we saw iron rings as steps leading down a shaft into a darkness without bottom.

"We shall go down," we said to International 4-8818.

"It is forbidden," they answered.

We said: "The Council does not know of this hole, so it cannot be forbidden."

And they answered: "Since the Council does not know of this hole, there can be no law permitting to enter it. And everything which is not permitted by law is forbidden."

But we said: “We shall go, none the less.”

They were frightened, but they stood by and watched us go.

We hung on the iron rings with our hands and our feet. We could see nothing below us. And above us the hole open upon the sky grew smaller and smaller, till it came to be the size of a button. But still we went down. Then our foot touched the ground. We rubbed our eyes, for we could not see. Then our eyes became used to the darkness, and we could not believe what we saw.

No man known to us could have built this place, nor the men known to our brothers who lived before us, and yet it was built by men. It was a great tunnel. Its walls were hard and smooth to the touch; it felt like stone, but it was not stone. On the ground there were long thin tracks of iron, but it was not iron; it felt smooth and cold as glass. We knelt, and we crawled forward, our hand groping along the iron line to see where it would lead. But there was an unbroken night ahead. Only the iron tracks glowed through it, straight and white, calling us to follow. But we could not follow, for we were losing the puddle of light behind us. So we turned and we crawled back, our hand on the iron line. And our heart beat in our fingertips, without reason. And then we knew.

We knew suddenly that this place was left from the Unmentionable Times. So it was true, and those Times had been, and all the wonders of those Times. Hundreds upon hundreds of years ago men knew secrets which we have lost. And we thought: “This is a foul place. They are damned who touch the things of the Unmentionable Times.” But our hand which followed the track, as we crawled, clung to the iron as if it would not leave it, as if the skin of our hand were thirsty and begging of the metal some secret fluid beating in its coldness.

We returned to the earth. International 4-8818 looked upon us and stepped back.

“Equality 7-2521,” they said, “your face is white.”

But we could not speak and we stood looking upon them.

They backed away, as if they dared not touch us. Then they smiled, but it was not a gay smile; it was lost and pleading. But still we could not speak. Then they said:

“We shall report our find to the City Council and both of us will be rewarded.”

And then we spoke. Our voice was hard and there was no mercy in our voice. We said:

“We shall not report our find to the City Council. We shall not report it to any men.”

They raised their hands to their ears, for never had they heard such words as these.

“International 4-8818,” we asked, “will you report us to the Council and see us lashed to death before your eyes?”

They stood straight of a sudden and they answered:

“Rather would we die.”

“Then,” we said, “keep silent. This place is ours. This place belongs to us, Equality 7-2521, and to no other men on earth. And if ever we surrender it, we shall surrender our life with it also.”

Then we saw that the eyes of International 4-8818 were full to the lids with tears they dared not drop, they whispered, and their voice trembled, so that their words lost all shape:

“The will of the Council is above all things, for it is the will of our brothers, which is holy. But if you wish it so, we shall obey you. Rather shall we be evil with you than good with all our brothers. May the Council have mercy upon both our hearts!”

Then we walked away together and back to the Home of the Street Sweepers. And we walked in silence.

Thus did it come to pass that each night, when the stars are high and the Street Sweepers sit in the City Theatre, we, Equality 7-2521, steal out and run through the darkness to our place. It is easy to leave the Theatre; when the candles are blown and the Actors come onto the stage, no eyes can see us as we crawl under our seat and under the cloth of the tent. Later it is easy to steal through the shadows and fall in line next to International 4-8818, as the column leaves the Theatre. It is dark in the streets and there are no men about, for no men may walk through the City when they have no mission to walk there. Each night, we run to the ravine, and we remove the stones we have piled upon the iron grill to hide it from men. Each night, for three hours, we are under the earth, alone.

We have stolen candles from the Home of the Street Sweepers, we have stolen flints and knives and paper, and we have brought them to this place. We have stolen glass vials and powders and acids from the Home of the Scholars. Now we sit in the tunnel for three hours each night and we study. We melt strange metals, and we mix acids, and we cut open the bodies of the animals which we find in the City Cesspool. We have built an oven of the bricks we gathered in the streets. We burn the wood we find in the ravine. The fire flickers in the oven and blue shadows dance upon the walls, and there is no sound of men to disturb us.

We have stolen manuscripts. This is a great offense. Manuscripts are precious, for our brothers in the Home of the Clerks spend one year to copy one single script in their clear handwriting. Manuscripts are rare and they are kept in the Home of the Scholars. So we sit under the earth and we read the stolen scripts. Two years have passed since we found this place. And in these two years we have learned

more than we had learned in the ten years of the Home of the Students.

We have learned things which are not in the scripts. We have solved secrets of which the Scholars have no knowledge. We have come to see how great is the unexplored, and many lifetimes will not bring us to the end of our quest. We wish nothing, save to be alone and to learn, and to feel as if with each day our sight were growing sharper than the hawk's and clearer than rock crystal.

Strange are the ways of evil. We are false in the faces of our brothers. We are defying the will of our Councils. We alone, of the thousands who walk this earth, we alone in this hour are doing a work which has no purpose save that we wish to do it. The evil of our crime is not for the human mind to probe. The nature of our punishment, if it be discovered, is not free for the human heart to ponder. Never, not in the memory of the Ancient Ones' Ancients, never have men done what we are doing.

And yet there is no shame in us and no regret. We say to ourselves that we are a wretch and a traitor. But we feel no burden upon our spirit and no fear in our heart. And it seems to us that our spirit is clear as a lake troubled by no eyes save those of the sun. And in our heart—strange are the ways of evil!—in our heart there is the first peace we have known in twenty years.

CHAPTER TWO

Liberty 5-3000… Liberty five-three thousand… Liberty 5-3000….

We wish to write this name. We wish to speak it, but we dare not speak it above a whisper. For men are forbidden to take notice of women, and women are forbidden to take notice of men. But we think of one among women, they whose name is Liberty 5-3000, and we think of no others.

The women who have been assigned to work the soil live in the Homes of the Peasants beyond the City. Where the City ends there is a great road winding off to the north, and we Street Sweepers must keep this road clean to the first milepost. There is a hedge along the road, and beyond the hedge lie the fields. The fields are black and ploughed, and they lie like a great fan before us, with their furrows gathered in some hand beyond the sky, spreading forth from that hand, opening wide apart as they come toward us, like black pleats that sparkle with thin, green spangles. Women work in the fields, and their white tunics in the wind are like the wings of sea-gulls beating over the black soil.

And there it was that we saw Liberty 5-3000 walking along the furrows. Their body was straight and thin as a blade of iron. Their eyes were dark and hard and glowing, with no fear in them, no kindness and no guilt. Their hair was golden as the sun; their hair flew in the wind, shining and wild, as if it defied men to restrain it. They threw seeds from their hand as if they deigned to fling a scornful gift, and the earth was a beggar under their feet.

We stood still; for the first time we knew fear, and then pain. And we stood still that we might not spill this pain more precious than pleasure.

Then we heard a voice from the others call their name: “Liberty 5-3000,” and they turned and walked back. Thus we learned their name, and we stood watching them go, till their white tunic was lost in the blue mist.

And the following day, as we came to the northern road, we kept our eyes upon Liberty 5-3000 in the field. And each day thereafter we knew the illness of waiting for our hour on the northern road. And there we looked at Liberty 5-3000 each day. We know not whether they looked at us also, but we think they did.

Then one day they came close to the hedge, and suddenly they turned to us. They turned in a whirl and the movement of their body stopped, as if slashed off, as suddenly as it had started. They stood still as a stone, and they looked straight upon us, straight in our eyes. There was no smile on their face, and no welcome. But their face was taut, and their eyes were dark. Then they turned as swiftly, and they

walked away from us.

But the following day, when we came to the road, they smiled. They smiled to us and for us. And we smiled in answer. Their head fell back, and their arms fell, as if their arms and their thin white neck were stricken suddenly with a great lassitude. They were not looking upon us, but upon the sky. Then they glanced at us over their shoulder, and we felt as if a hand had touched our body, slipping softly from our lips to our feet.

Every morning thereafter, we greeted each other with our eyes. We dared not speak. It is a transgression to speak to men of other Trades, save in groups at the Social Meetings. But once, standing at the hedge, we raised our hand to our forehead and then moved it slowly, palm down, toward Liberty 5-3000. Had the others seen it, they could have guessed nothing, for it looked only as if we were shading our eyes from the sun. But Liberty 5-3000 saw it and understood. They raised their hand to their forehead and moved it as we had. Thus, each day, we greet Liberty 5-3000, and they answer, and no men can suspect.

We do not wonder at this new sin of ours. It is our second Transgression of Preference, for we do not think of all our brothers, as we must, but only of one, and their name is Liberty 5-3000. We do not know why we think of them. We do not know why, when we think of them, we feel of a sudden that the earth is good and that it is not a burden to live.

We do not think of them as Liberty 5-3000 any longer. We have given them a name in our thoughts. We call them the Golden One. But it is a sin to give men other names which distinguish them from other men. Yet we call them the Golden One, for they are not like the others. The Golden One are not like the others.

And we take no heed of the law which says that men may not think of women, save at the Time of Mating. This is the time each spring when all the men older than twenty and all the women older than eighteen are sent for one night to the City Palace of Mating. And each of the men have one of the women assigned to them by the Council of Eugenics. Children are born each winter, but women never see their children and children never know their parents. Twice have we been sent to the Palace of Mating, but it is an ugly and shameful matter, of which we do not like to think.

We had broken so many laws, and today we have broken one more. Today we spoke to the Golden One.

The other women were far off in the field, when we stopped at the hedge by the side of the road. The Golden One were kneeling alone at the moat which runs through the field. And the drops of water falling from their hands, as they raised the water to their lips,

were like sparks of fire in the sun. Then the Golden One saw us, and they did not move, kneeling there, looking at us, and circles of light played upon their white tunic, from the sun on the water of the moat, and one sparkling drop fell from a finger of their hand held as frozen in the air.

Then the Golden One rose and walked to the hedge, as if they had heard a command in our eyes. The two other Street Sweepers of our brigade were a hundred paces away down the road. And we thought that International 4-8818 would not betray us, and Union 5-3992 would not understand. So we looked straight upon the Golden One, and we saw the shadows of their lashes on their white cheeks and the sparks of sun on their lips. And we said:

"You are beautiful, Liberty 5-3000."

Their face did not move and they did not avert their eyes. Only their eyes grew wider, and there was triumph in their eyes, and it was not triumph over us, but over things we could not guess.

Then they asked:

"What is your name?"

"Equality 7-2521," we answered.

"You are not one of our brothers, Equality 7-2521, for we do not wish you to be."

We cannot say what they meant, for there are no words for their meaning, but we know it without words and we knew it then.

"No," we answered, "nor are you one of our sisters."

"If you see us among scores of women, will you look upon us?"

"We shall look upon you, Liberty 5-3000, if we see you among all the women of the earth."

Then they asked:

"Are Street Sweepers sent to different parts of the City or do they always work in the same places?"

"They always work in the same places," we answered, "and no one will take this road away from us."

"Your eyes," they said, "are not like the eyes of any among men."

And suddenly, without cause for the thought which came to us, we felt cold, cold to our stomach.

"How old are you?" we asked.

They understood our thought, for they lowered their eyes for the first time.

"Seventeen," they whispered.

And we sighed, as if a burden had been taken from us, for we had been thinking without reason of the Palace of Mating. And we thought that we would not let the Golden One be sent to the Palace. How to prevent it, how to bar the will of the Councils, we knew not, but we knew suddenly that we would. Only we do not know why such

thought came to us, for these ugly matters bear no relation to us and the Golden One. What relation can they bear?

Still, without reason, as we stood there by the hedge, we felt our lips drawn tight with hatred, a sudden hatred for all our brother men. And the Golden One saw it and smiled slowly, and there was in their smile the first sadness we had seen in them. We think that in the wisdom of women the Golden One had understood more than we can understand.

Then three of the sisters in the field appeared, coming toward the road, so the Golden One walked away from us. They took the bag of seeds, and they threw the seeds into the furrows of earth as they walked away. But the seeds flew wildly, for the hand of the Golden One was trembling.

Yet as we walked back to the Home of the Street Sweepers, we felt that we wanted to sing, without reason. So we were reprimanded tonight, in the dining hall, for without knowing it we had begun to sing aloud some tune we had never heard. But it is not proper to sing without reason, save at the Social Meetings.

"We are singing because we are happy," we answered the one of the Home Council who reprimanded us.

"Indeed you are happy," they answered. "How else can men be when they live for their brothers?"

And now, sitting here in our tunnel, we wonder about these words. It is forbidden, not to be happy. For, as it has been explained to us, men are free and the earth belongs to them; and all things on earth belong to all men; and the will of all men together is good for all; and so all men must be happy.

Yet as we stand at night in the great hall, removing our garments for sleep, we look upon our brothers and we wonder. The heads of our brothers are bowed. The eyes of our brothers are dull, and never do they look one another in the eyes. The shoulders of our brothers are hunched, and their muscles are drawn, as if their bodies were shrinking and wished to shrink out of sight. And a word steals into our mind, as we look upon our brothers, and that word is fear.

There is fear hanging in the air of the sleeping halls, and in the air of the streets. Fear walks through the City, fear without name, without shape. All men feel it and none dare to speak.

We feel it also, when we are in the Home of the Street Sweepers. But here, in our tunnel, we feel it no longer. The air is pure under the ground. There is no odor of men. And these three hours give us strength for our hours above the ground.

Our body is betraying us, for the Council of the Home looks with suspicion upon us. It is not good to feel too much joy nor to be glad that our body lives. For we matter not and it must not matter to us

whether we live or die, which is to be as our brothers will it. But we, Equality 7-2521, are glad to be living. If this is a vice, then we wish no virtue.

Yet our brothers are not like us. All is not well with our brothers. There are Fraternity 2-5503, a quiet boy with wise, kind eyes, who cry suddenly, without reason, in the midst of day or night, and their body shakes with sobs so they cannot explain. There are Solidarity 9-6347, who are a bright youth, without fear in the day; but they scream in their sleep, and they scream: "Help us! Help us! Help us!" into the night, in a voice which chills our bones, but the Doctors cannot cure Solidarity 9-6347.

And as we all undress at night, in the dim light of candles, our brothers are silent, for they dare not speak the thoughts of their minds. For all must agree with all, and they cannot know if their thoughts are the thoughts of all, and so they fear to speak. And they are glad when the candles are blown for the night. But we, Equality 7-2521, look through the window upon the sky, and there is peace in the sky, and cleanliness, and dignity. And beyond the City there lies the plain, and beyond the plain, black upon the black sky, there lies the Uncharted Forest.

We do not wish to look upon the Uncharted Forest. We do not wish to think of it. But ever do our eyes return to that black patch upon the sky. Men never enter the Uncharted Forest, for there is no power to explore it and no path to lead among its ancient trees which stand as guards of fearful secrets. It is whispered that once or twice in a hundred years, one among the men of the City escape alone and run to the Uncharted Forest, without call or reason. These men do not return. They perish from hunger and from the claws of the wild beasts which roam the Forest. But our Councils say this is only a legend. We have heard that there are many Uncharted Forests over the land, among the Cities. And it is whispered that they have grown over the ruins of many cities of the Unmentionable Times. The trees have swallowed the ruins, and the bones under the ruins, and all the things which perished.

And as we look upon the Uncharted Forest far in the night, we think of the secrets of the Unmentionable Times. And we wonder how it came to pass that these secrets were lost to the world. We have heard the legends of the great fighting, in which many men fought on one side and only a few on the other. These few were the Evil Ones and they were conquered. Then great fires raged over the land. And in these fires the Evil Ones were burned. And the fire which is called the Dawn of the Great Rebirth, was the Script Fire where all the scripts of the Evil Ones were burned, and with them all the words of the Evil Ones. Great mountains of flame stood in the squares of the Cities for

three months. Then came the Great Rebirth.

The words of the Evil Ones… The words of the Unmentionable Times… What are the words which we have lost?

May the Council have mercy upon us! We had no wish to write such a question, and we knew not what we were doing till we had written it. We shall not ask this question and we shall not think it. We shall not call death upon our head.

And yet… And yet…

There is some word, one single word which is not in the language of men, but which has been. And this is the Unspeakable Word, which no men may speak nor hear. But sometimes, and it is rare, sometimes, somewhere, one among men find that word. They find it upon scraps of old manuscripts or cut into the fragments of ancient stones. But when they speak it they are put to death. There is no crime punished by death in this world, save this one crime of speaking the Unspeakable Word.

We have seen one of such men burned alive in the square of the City. And it was a sight which has stayed with us through the years, and it haunts us, and follows us, and it gives us no rest. We were a child then, ten years old. And we stood in the great square with all the children and all the men of the City, sent to behold the burning. They brought the Transgressor out into the square and they led him to the pyre. They had torn out the tongue of the Transgressor, so that they could speak no longer. The Transgressor were young and tall. They had hair of gold and eyes blue as morning. They walked to the pyre, and their step did not falter. And of all the faces on that square, of all the faces which shrieked and screamed and spat curses upon them, theirs was the calmest and happiest face.

As the chains were wound over their body at the stake, and a flame set to the pyre, the Transgressor looked upon the City. There was a thin thread of blood running from the corner of their mouth, but their lips were smiling. And a monstrous thought came to us then, which has never left us. We had heard of Saints. There are the Saints of Labor, and the Saints of the Councils, and the Saints of the Great Rebirth. But we had never seen a Saint nor what the likeness of a Saint should be. And we thought then, standing in the square, that the likeness of a Saint was the face we saw before us in the flames, the face of the Transgressor of the Unspeakable Word.

As the flames rose, a thing happened which no eyes saw but ours, else we would not be living today. Perhaps it had only seemed to us. But it seemed to us that the eyes of the Transgressor had chosen us from the crowd and were looking straight upon us. There was no pain in their eyes and no knowledge of the agony of their body. There was only joy in them, and pride, a pride holier than it is fit for human

pride to be. And it seemed as if these eyes were trying to tell us something through the flames, to send into our eyes some word without sound. And it seemed as if these eyes were begging us to gather that word and not to let it go from us and from the earth. But the flames rose and we could not guess the word….

What—even if we have to burn for it like the Saint of the pyre—what is the Unspeakable Word?

CHAPTER THREE

We, Equality 7-2521, have discovered a new power of nature. And we have discovered it alone, and we are to know it.

It is said. Now let us be lashed for it, if we must. The Council of Scholars has said that we all know the things which exist and therefore all the things which are not known by all do not exist. But we think that the Council of Scholars is blind. The secrets of this earth are not for all men to see, but only for those who will seek them. We know, for we have found a secret unknown to all our brothers.

We know not what this power is nor whence it comes. But we know its nature, we have watched it and worked with it. We saw it first two years ago. One night, we were cutting open the body of a dead frog when we saw its leg jerking. It was dead, yet it moved. Some power unknown to men was making it move. We could not understand it. Then, after many tests, we found the answer. The frog had been hanging on a wire of copper; and it had been the metal of our knife which had sent a strange power to the copper through the brine of the frog's body. We put a piece of copper and a piece of zinc into a jar of brine, we touched a wire to them, and there, under our fingers, was a miracle which had never occurred before, a new miracle and a new power.

This discovery haunted us. We followed it in preference to all our studies. We worked with it, we tested in more ways than we can describe, and each step was another miracle unveiling before us. We came to know that we had found the greatest power on earth. For it defies all the laws known to men. It makes the needle move and turn on the compass which we stole from the Home of the Scholars; but we had been taught, when still a child, that the loadstone points to the north and this is a law which nothing can change; yet our new power defies all laws. We found that it causes lightning, and never have men known what causes lightning. In thunderstorms, we raised a tall rod of iron by the side of our hole, and we watched it from below. We have seen the lightning strike it again and again. And now we know that metal draws the power of the sky, and that metal can be made to give it forth.

We have built strange things with this discovery of ours. We used for it the copper wires which we found here under the ground. We have walked the length of our tunnel, with a candle lighting the way. We could go no farther than half a mile, for earth and rock had fallen at both ends. But we gathered all the things we found and we brought them to our work place. We found strange boxes with bars of metal inside, with many cords and strands and coils of metal. We found

wires that led to strange little globes of glass on the walls; they contained threads of metal thinner than a spider's web.

These things help us in our work. We do not understand them, but we think that the men of the Unmentionable Times had known our power of the sky, and these things had some relation to it. We do not know, but we shall learn. We cannot stop now, even though it frightens us that we are alone in our knowledge.

No single one can possess greater wisdom than the many Scholars who are elected by all men for their wisdom. Yet we can. We do. We have fought against saying it, but now it is said. We do not care. We forget all men, all laws and all things save our metals and our wires. So much is still to be learned! So long a road lies before us, and what care we if we must travel it alone!

CHAPTER FOUR

Many days passed before we could speak to the Golden One again. But then came the day when the sky turned white, as if the sun had burst and spread its flame in the air, and the fields lay still without breath, and the dust of the road was white in the glow. So the women of the field were weary, and they tarried over their work, and they were far from the road when we came. But the Golden One stood alone at the hedge, waiting. We stopped and we saw that their eyes, so hard and scornful to the world, were looking at us as if they would obey any word we might speak.

And we said:

"We have given you a name in our thoughts, Liberty 5-3000."

"What is our name?" they asked.

"The Golden One."

"Nor do we call you Equality 7-2521 when we think of you."

"What name have you given us?"

They looked straight into our eyes and they held their head high and they answered:

"The Unconquered."

For a long time we could not speak. Then we said:

"Such thoughts are forbidden, Golden One."

"But you think such thoughts as these and you wish us to think them."

We looked into their eyes and we could not lie.

"Yes," we whispered, and they smiled, and then we said: "Our dearest one, do not obey us."

They stepped back, and their eyes were wide and still.

"Speak those words again," they whispered.

"Which words?" we asked. But they did not answer, and we knew it.

"Our dearest one," we whispered.

Never have men said this to women.

The head of the Golden One bowed slowly, and they stood still before us, their arms at their sides, the palms of their hands turned to us, as if their body were delivered in submission to our eyes. And we could not speak.

Then they raised their head, and they spoke simply and gently, as if they wished us to forget some anxiety of their own.

"The day is hot," they said, "and you have worked for many hours and you must be weary."

"No," we answered.

"It is cooler in the fields," they said, "and there is water to drink.

Are you thirsty?"

"Yes," we answered, "but we cannot cross the hedge."

"We shall bring the water to you," they said.

Then they knelt by the moat, they gathered water in their two hands, they rose and they held the water out to our lips.

We do not know if we drank that water. We only knew suddenly that their hands were empty, but we were still holding our lips to their hands, and that they knew it but did not move.

We raised our head and stepped back. For we did not understand what had made us do this, and we were afraid to understand it.

And the Golden One stepped back, and stood looking upon their hands in wonder. Then the Golden One moved away, even though no others were coming, and they moved stepping back, as if they could not turn from us, their arms bent before them, as if they could not lower their hands.

CHAPTER FIVE

We made it. We created it. We brought it forth from the night of the ages. We alone. Our hands. Our mind. Ours alone and only.

We know not what we are saying. Our head is reeling. We look upon the light which we had made. We shall be forgiven for anything we say tonight….

Tonight, after more days and trials than we can count, we finished building a strange thing, from the remains of the Unmentionable Times, a box of glass, devised to give forth the power of the sky of greater strength than we had ever achieved before. And when we put our wires to this box, when we closed the current—the wire glowed! It came to life, it turned red, and a circle of light lay on the stone before us.

We stood, and we held our head in our hands. We could not conceive of that which we had created. We had touched no flint, made no fire. Yet here was light, light that came from nowhere, light from the heart of metal.

We blew out the candle. Darkness swallowed us. There was nothing left around us, nothing save night and a thin thread of flame in it, as a crack in the wall of a prison. We stretched our hands to the wire, and we saw our fingers in the red glow. We could not see our body nor feel it, and in that moment nothing existed save our two hands over a wire glowing in a black abyss.

Then we thought of the meaning of that which lay before us. We can light our tunnel, and the City, and all the Cities of the world with nothing save metal and wires. We can give our brothers a new light, cleaner and brighter than any they have ever known. The power of the sky can be made to do men's bidding. There are no limits to its secrets and its might, and it can be made to grant us anything if we but choose to ask.

Then we knew what we must do. Our discovery is too great for us to waste our time in sweeping streets. We must not keep our secret to ourselves, nor buried under the ground. We must bring it into the sight of all men. We need all our time, we need the work rooms of the Home of the Scholars, we want the help of our brother Scholars and their wisdom joined to ours. There is so much work ahead for all of us, for all the Scholars of the world.

In a month, the World Council of Scholars is to meet in our City. It is a great Council, to which the wisest of all lands are elected, and it meets once a year in the different Cities of the earth. We shall go to this Council and we shall lay before them, as our gift, the glass box with the power of the sky. We shall confess everything to them. They

will see, understand and forgive. For our gift is greater than our transgression. They will explain it to the Council of Vocations, and we shall be assigned to the Home of the Scholars. This has never been done before, but neither has a gift such as ours ever been offered to men.

We must wait. We must guard our tunnel as we had never guarded it before. For should any men save the Scholars learn of our secret, they would not understand it, nor would they believe us. They would see nothing, save our crime of working alone, and they would destroy us and our light. We care not about our body, but our light is…

Yes, we do care. For the first time we do care about our body. For this wire is a part of our body, as a vein torn from us, glowing with our blood. Are we proud of this thread of metal, or of our hands which made it, or is there a line to divide these two?

We stretch out our arms. For the first time do we know how strong our arms are. And a strange thought comes to us: we wonder, for the first time in our life, what we look like. Men never see their own faces and never ask their brothers about it, for it is evil to have concern for their own faces or bodies. But tonight, for a reason we cannot fathom, we wish it were possible to us to know the likeness of our own person.

CHAPTER SIX

We have not written for thirty days. For thirty days we have not been here, in our tunnel. We had been caught.

It happened on that night when we wrote last. We forgot, that night, to watch the sand in the glass which tells us when three hours have passed and it is time to return to the City Theatre. When we remembered, the sand had run out.

We hastened to the Theatre. But the big tent stood grey and silent against the sky. The streets of the City lay before us, dark and empty. If we went back to hide in our tunnel, we would be found and our light with us. So we walked to the Home of the Street Sweepers.

When the Council of the Home questioned us, we looked upon the faces of the Council, but there was no curiosity in those faces, and no anger, and no mercy. So when the oldest of them asked us: "Where have you been?" we thought of our glass box and of our light, and we forgot all else. And we answered:

"We will not tell you."

The oldest did not question us further. They turned to the two youngest, and said, and their voice was bored:

"Take our brother Equality 7-2521 to the Palace of Corrective Detention. Lash them until they tell."

So we were taken to the Stone Room under the Palace of Corrective Detention. This room has no windows and it is empty save for an iron post. Two men stood by the post, naked but for leather aprons and leather hoods over their faces. Those who had brought us departed, leaving us to the two Judges who stood in a corner of the room. The Judges were small, thin men, grey and bent. They gave the signal to the two strong hooded ones.

They tore our clothes from our body, they threw us down upon our knees and they tied our hands to the iron post.

The first blow of the lash felt as if our spine had been cut in two. The second blow stopped the first, and for a second we felt nothing, then pain struck us in our throat and fire ran in our lungs without air. But we did not cry out.

The lash whistled like a singing wind. We tried to count the blows, but we lost count. We knew that the blows were falling upon our back. Only we felt nothing upon our back any longer. A flaming grill kept dancing before our eyes, and we thought of nothing save that grill, a grill, a grill of red squares, and then we knew that we were looking at the squares of the iron grill in the door, and there were also the squares of stone on the walls, and the squares which the lash was cutting upon our back, crossing and re-crossing itself in our

flesh.

Then we saw a fist before us. It knocked our chin up, and we saw the red froth of our mouth on the withered fingers, and the Judge asked:

"Where have you been?"

But we jerked our head away, hid our face upon our tied hands, and bit our lips.

The lash whistled again. We wondered who was sprinkling burning coal dust upon the floor, for we saw drops of red twinkling on the stones around us.

Then we knew nothing, save two voices snarling steadily, one after the other, even though we knew they were speaking many minutes apart:

"Where have you been where have you been where have you been where have you been?…"

And our lips moved, but the sound trickled back into our throat, and the sound was only:

"The light… The light… The light…."

Then we knew nothing.

We opened our eyes, lying on our stomach on the brick floor of a cell. We looked upon two hands lying far before us on the bricks, and we moved them, and we knew that they were our hands. But we could not move our body. Then we smiled, for we thought of the light and that we had not betrayed it.

We lay in our cell for many days. The door opened twice each day, once for the men who brought us bread and water, and once for the Judges. Many Judges came to our cell, first the humblest and then the most honored Judges of the City. They stood before us in their white togas, and they asked:

"Are you ready to speak?"

But we shook our head, lying before them on the floor. And they departed.

We counted each day and each night as it passed. Then, tonight, we knew that we must escape. For tomorrow the World Council of Scholars is to meet in our City.

It was easy to escape from the Palace of Corrective Detention. The locks are old on the doors and there are no guards about. There is no reason to have guards, for men have never defied the Councils so far as to escape from whatever place they were ordered to be. Our body is healthy and strength returns to it speedily. We lunged against the door and it gave way. We stole through the dark passages, and through the dark streets, and down into our tunnel.

We lit the candle and we saw that our place had not been found and nothing had been touched. And our glass box stood before us on

the cold oven, as we had left it. What matter they now, the scars upon our back!

Tomorrow, in the full light of day, we shall take our box, and leave our tunnel open, and walk through the streets to the Home of the Scholars. We shall put before them the greatest gift ever offered to men. We shall tell them the truth. We shall hand to them, as our confession, these pages we have written. We shall join our hands to theirs, and we shall work together, with the power of the sky, for the glory of mankind. Our blessing upon you, our brothers! Tomorrow, you will take us back into your fold and we shall be an outcast no longer. Tomorrow we shall be one of you again. Tomorrow…

CHAPTER SEVEN

It is dark here in the forest. The leaves rustle over our head, black against the last gold of the sky. The moss is soft and warm. We shall sleep on this moss for many nights, till the beasts of the forest come to tear our body. We have no bed now, save the moss, and no future, save the beasts.

We are old now, yet we were young this morning, when we carried our glass box through the streets of the City to the Home of the Scholars. No men stopped us, for there were none about the Palace of Corrective Detention, and the others knew nothing. No men stopped us at the gate. We walked through the empty passages and into the great hall where the World Council of Scholars sat in solemn meeting.

We saw nothing as we entered, save the sky in the great windows, blue and glowing. Then we saw the Scholars who sat around a long table; they were as shapeless clouds huddled at the rise of a great sky. There were the men whose famous names we knew, and others from distant lands whose names we had not heard. We saw a great painting on the wall over their heads, of the twenty illustrious men who had invented the candle.

All the heads of the Council turned to us as we entered. These great and wise of the earth did not know what to think of us, and they looked upon us with wonder and curiosity, as if we were a miracle. It is true that our tunic was torn and stained with brown stains which had been blood. We raised our right arm and we said:

"Our greeting to you, our honored brothers of the World Council of Scholars!"

Then Collective 0-0009, the oldest and wisest of the Council, spoke and asked:

"Who are you, our brother? For you do not look like a Scholar."

"Our name is Equality 7-2521," we answered, "and we are a Street Sweeper of this City."

Then it was as if a great wind had stricken the hall, for all the Scholars spoke at once, and they were angry and frightened.

"A Street Sweeper! A Street Sweeper walking in upon the World Council of Scholars! It is not to be believed! It is against all the rules and all the laws!"

But we knew how to stop them.

"Our brothers!" we said. "We matter not, nor our transgression. It is only our brother men who matter. Give no thought to us, for we are nothing, but listen to our words, for we bring you a gift such as has never been brought to men. Listen to us, for we hold the future of

mankind in our hands."

Then they listened.

We placed our glass box on the table before them. We spoke of it, and of our long quest, and of our tunnel, and of our escape from the Palace of Corrective Detention. Not a hand moved in that hall, as we spoke, nor an eye. Then we put the wires to the box, and they all bent forward and sat still, watching. And we stood still, our eyes upon the wire. And slowly, slowly as a flush of blood, a red flame trembled in the wire. Then the wire glowed.

But terror struck the men of the Council. They leapt to their feet, they ran from the table, and they stood pressed against the wall, huddled together, seeking the warmth of one another's bodies to give them courage.

We looked upon them and we laughed and said:

"Fear nothing, our brothers. There is a great power in these wires, but this power is tamed. It is yours. We give it to you."

Still they would not move.

"We give you the power of the sky!" we cried. "We give you the key to the earth! Take it, and let us be one of you, the humblest among you. Let us work together, and harness this power, and make it ease the toil of men. Let us throw away our candles and our torches. Let us flood our cities with light. Let us bring a new light to men!"

But they looked upon us, and suddenly we were afraid. For their eyes were still, and small, and evil.

"Our brothers!" we cried. "Have you nothing to say to us?"

Then Collective 0-0009 moved forward. They moved to the table and the others followed.

"Yes," spoke Collective 0-0009, "we have much to say to you."

The sound of their voice brought silence to the hall and to the beat of our heart.

"Yes," said Collective 0-0009, "we have much to say to a wretch who have broken all the laws and who boast of their infamy! How dared you think that your mind held greater wisdom than the minds of your brothers? And if the Council had decreed that you be a Street Sweeper, how dared you think that you could be of greater use to men than in sweeping the streets?"

"How dared you, gutter cleaner," spoke Fraternity 9-3452, "to hold yourself as one alone and with the thoughts of one and not of many?"

"You shall be burned at the stake," said Democracy 4-6998.

"No, they shall be lashed," said Unanimity 7-3304, "till there is nothing left under the lashes."

"No," said Collective 0-0009, "we cannot decide upon this, our brothers. No such crime has ever been committed, and it is not for us

to judge. Nor for any small Council. We shall deliver this creature to the World Council itself and let their will be done."

We looked upon them and we pleaded:

"Our brothers! You are right. Let the will of the Council be done upon our body. We do not care. But the light? What will you do with the light?"

Collective 0-0009 looked upon us, and they smiled.

"So you think you have found a new power," said Collective 0-0009. "Do you think all your brothers think that?"

"No," we answered.

"What is not thought by all men cannot be true," said Collective 0-0009.

"You have worked on this alone?" asked International 1-5537.

"Yes," we answered.

"What is not done collectively cannot be good," said International 1-5537.

"Many men in the Homes of the Scholars have had strange new ideas in the past," said Solidarity 8-1164, "but when the majority of their brother Scholars voted against them, they abandoned their ideas, as all men must."

"This box is useless," said Alliance 6-7349.

"Should it be what they claim of it," said Harmony 9-2642, "then it would bring ruin to the Department of Candles. The Candle is a great boon to mankind, as approved by all men. Therefore it cannot be destroyed by the whim of one."

"This would wreck the Plans of the World Council," said Unanimity 2-9913, "and without the Plans of the World Council the sun cannot rise. It took fifty years to secure the approval of all the Councils for the Candle, and to decide upon the number needed, and to re-fit the Plans so as to make candles instead of torches. This touched upon thousands and thousands of men working in scores of States. We cannot alter the Plans again so soon."

"And if this should lighten the toil of men," said Similarity 5-0306, "then it is a great evil, for men have no cause to exist save in toiling for other men."

Then Collective 0-0009 rose and pointed at our box.

"This thing," they said, "must be destroyed."

And all the others cried as one:

"It must be destroyed!"

Then we leapt to the table.

We seized our box, we shoved them aside, and we ran to the window. We turned and we looked at them for the last time, and a rage, such as is not fit for humans to know, choked our voice in our throat.

“You fools!” we cried. “You fools! You thrice-damned fools!”

We swung our fist through the windowpane, and we leapt out in a ringing rain of glass.

We fell, but we never let the box fall from our hands. Then we ran. We ran blindly, and men and houses streaked past us in a torrent without shape. And the road seemed not to be flat before us, but as if it were leaping up to meet us, and we waited for the earth to rise and strike us in the face. But we ran. We knew not where we were going. We knew only that we must run, run to the end of the world, to the end of our days.

Then we knew suddenly that we were lying on a soft earth and that we had stopped. Trees taller than we had ever seen before stood over us in a great silence. Then we knew. We were in the Uncharted Forest. We had not thought of coming here, but our legs had carried our wisdom, and our legs had brought us to the Uncharted Forest against our will.

Our glass box lay beside us. We crawled to it, we fell upon it, our face in our arms, and we lay still.

We lay thus for a long time. Then we rose, we took our box, and walked on into the forest.

It mattered not where we went. We knew that men would not follow us, for they never entered the Uncharted Forest. We had nothing to fear from them. The forest disposes of its own victims. This gave us no fear either. Only we wished to be away from the City and the air that touches upon the air of the City. So we walked on, our box in our arms, our heart empty.

We are doomed. Whatever days are left to us, we shall spend them alone. And we have heard of the corruption to be found in solitude. We have torn ourselves from the truth which is our brother men, and there is no road back for us, and no redemption.

We know these things, but we do not care. We care for nothing on earth. We are tired.

Only the glass box in our arms is like a living heart that gives us strength. We have lied to ourselves. We have not built this box for the good of our brothers. We built it for its own sake. It is above all our brothers to us, and its truth above their truth. Why wonder about this? We have not many days to live. We are walking to the fangs awaiting us somewhere among the great, silent trees. There is not a thing behind us to regret.

Then a blow of pain struck us, our first and our only. We thought of the Golden One. We thought of the Golden One whom we shall never see again. Then the pain passed. It is best. We are one of the Damned. It is best if the Golden One forget our name and the body which bore that name.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It has been a day of wonder, this, our first day in the forest.

We awoke when a ray of sunlight fell across our face. We wanted to leap to our feet, as we have had to leap to our feet every morning of our life, but we remembered suddenly that no bell had rung and that there was no bell to ring anywhere. We lay on our back, we threw our arms out, and we looked up at the sky. The leaves had edges of silver that trembled and rippled like a river of green and fire flowing high above us.

We did not wish to move. We thought suddenly that we could lie thus as long as we wished, and we laughed aloud at the thought. We could also rise, or run, or leap, or fall down again. We were thinking that these were things without sense, but before we knew it, our body had risen in one leap. Our arms stretched out of their own will, and our body whirled and whirled, till it raised a wind to rustle through the leaves of the bushes. Then our hands seized a branch and swung us high into a tree, with no aim save the wonder of learning the strength of our body. The branch snapped under us and we fell upon the moss that was soft as a cushion. Then our body, losing all sense, rolled over and over on the moss, dry leaves in our tunic, in our hair, in our face. And we heard suddenly that we were laughing, laughing aloud, laughing as if there were no power left in us save laughter.

Then we took our glass box, and we went into the forest. We went on, cutting through the branches, and it was as if we were swimming through a sea of leaves, with the bushes as waves rising and falling and rising around us, and flinging their green sprays high to the treetops. The trees parted before us, calling us forward. The forest seemed to welcome us. We went on, without thought, without care, with nothing to feel save the song of our body.

We stopped when we felt hunger. We saw birds in the tree branches, and flying from under our footsteps. We picked a stone and we sent it as an arrow at a bird. It fell before us. We made a fire, we cooked the bird, and we ate it, and no meal had ever tasted better to us. And we thought suddenly that there was a great satisfaction to be found in the food which we need and obtain by our own hand. And we wished to be hungry again and soon, that we might know again this strange new pride in eating.

Then we walked on. And we came to a stream which lay as a streak of glass among the trees. It lay so still that we saw no water but only a cut in the earth, in which the trees grew down, upturned, and the sky at the bottom. We knelt by the stream and we bent down to drink. And then we stopped. For, upon the blue of the sky below us,

we saw our own face for the first time.

We sat still and we held our breath. For our face and our body were beautiful. Our face was not like the faces of our brothers, for we felt no pity when we looked upon it. Our body was not like the bodies of our brothers, for our limbs were straight and thin and hard and strong. And we thought that we could trust this being who looked upon us from the stream, and that we had nothing to fear from this being.

We walked on till the sun had set. When the shadows gathered among the trees, we stopped in a hollow between the roots, where we shall sleep tonight. And suddenly, for the first time this day, we remembered that we are the Damned. We remembered it, and we laughed.

We are writing this on the paper we had hidden in our tunic together with the written pages we had brought for the World Council of Scholars, but never given to them. We have much to speak of to ourselves, and we hope we shall find the words for it in the days to come. Now, we cannot speak, for we cannot understand.

CHAPTER NINE

We have not written for many days. We did not wish to speak. For we needed no words to remember that which has happened to us.

It was on our second day in the forest that we heard steps behind us. We hid in the bushes, and we waited. The steps came closer. And then we saw the fold of a white tunic among the trees, and a gleam of gold.

We leapt forward, we ran to them, and we stood looking upon the Golden One.

They saw us, and their hands closed into fists, and the fists pulled their arms down, as if they wished their arms to hold them, while their body swayed. And they could not speak.

We dared not come too close to them. We asked, and our voice trembled:

"How come you to be here, Golden One?"

But they whispered only:

"We have found you…."

"How came you to be in the forest?" we asked.

They raised their head, and there was a great pride in their voice; they answered:

"We have followed you."

Then we could not speak, and they said:

"We heard that you had gone to the Uncharted Forest, for the whole City is speaking of it. So on the night of the day when we heard it, we ran away from the Home of the Peasants. We found the marks of your feet across the plain where no men walk. So we followed them, and we went into the forest, and we followed the path where the branches were broken by your body."

Their white tunic was torn, and the branches had cut the skin of their arms, but they spoke as if they had never taken notice of it, nor of weariness, nor of fear.

"We have followed you," they said, "and we shall follow you wherever you go. If danger threatens you, we shall face it also. If it be death, we shall die with you. You are damned, and we wish to share your damnation."

They looked upon us, and their voice was low, but there was bitterness and triumph in their voice:

"Your eyes are as a flame, but our brothers have neither hope nor fire. Your mouth is cut of granite, but our brothers are soft and humble. Your head is high, but our brothers cringe. You walk, but our brothers crawl. We wish to be damned with you, rather than be blessed with all our brothers. Do as you please with us, but do not

send us away from you."

Then they knelt, and bowed their golden head before us.

We had never thought of that which we did. We bent to raise the Golden One to their feet, but when we touched them, it was as if madness had stricken us. We seized their body and we pressed our lips to theirs. The Golden One breathed once, and their breath was a moan, and then their arms closed around us.

We stood together for a long time. And we were frightened that we had lived for twenty-one years and had never known what joy is possible to men.

Then we said:

"Our dearest one. Fear nothing of the forest. There is no danger in solitude. We have no need of our brothers. Let us forget their good and our evil, let us forget all things save that we are together and that there is joy between us. Give us your hand. Look ahead. It is our own world, Golden One, a strange, unknown world, but our own."

Then we walked on into the forest, their hand in ours.

And that night we knew that to hold the body of a woman in our arms is neither ugly nor shameful, but the one ecstasy granted to the race of men.

We have walked for many days. The forest has no end, and we seek no end. But each day added to the chain of days between us and the City is like an added blessing.

We have made a bow and many arrows. We can kill more birds than we need for our food; we find water and fruit in the forest. At night, we choose a clearing, and we build a ring of fires around it. We sleep in the midst of that ring, and the beasts dare not attack us. We can see their eyes, green and yellow as coals, watching us from the tree branches beyond. The fires smolder as a crown of jewels around us, and smoke stands still in the air, in columns made blue by the moonlight. We sleep together in the midst of the ring, the arms of the Golden One around us, their head upon our breast.

Some day, we shall stop and build a house, when we shall have gone far enough. But we do not have to hasten. The days before us are without end, like the forest.

We cannot understand this new life which we have found, yet it seems so clear and so simple. When questions come to puzzle us, we walk faster, then turn and forget all things as we watch the Golden One following. The shadows of leaves fall upon their arms, as they spread the branches apart, but their shoulders are in the sun. The skin of their arms is like a blue mist, but their shoulders are white and glowing, as if the light fell not from above, but rose from under their skin. We watch the leaf which has fallen upon their shoulder, and it lies at the curve of their neck, and a drop of dew glistens upon it like a

jewel. They approach us, and they stop, laughing, knowing what we think, and they wait obediently, without questions, till it pleases us to turn and go on.

We go on and we bless the earth under our feet. But questions come to us again, as we walk in silence. If that which we have found is the corruption of solitude, then what can men wish for save corruption? If this is the great evil of being alone, then what is good and what is evil?

Everything which comes from the many is good. Everything which comes from one is evil. Thus we have been taught with our first breath. We have broken the law, but we have never doubted it. Yet now, as we walk the forest, we are learning to doubt.

There is no life for men, save in useful toil for the good of their brothers. But we lived not, when we toiled for our brothers, we were only weary. There is no joy for men, save the joy shared with all their brothers. But the only things which taught us joy were the power created in our wires, and the Golden One. And both these joys belong to us alone, they come from us alone, they bear no relation to our brothers, and they do not concern our brothers in any way. Thus do we wonder.

There is some error, one frightful error, in the thinking of men. What is that error? We do not know, but the knowledge struggles within us, struggles to be born.

Today, the Golden One stopped suddenly and said:

"We love you."

But then they frowned and shook their head and looked at us helplessly.

"No," they whispered, "that is not what we wished to say."

They were silent, then they spoke slowly, and their words were halting, like the words of a child learning to speak for the first time:

"We are one… alone… and only… and we love you who are one… alone… and only."

We looked into each other's eyes and we knew that the breath of a miracle had touched us, and fled, and left us groping vainly.

And we felt torn, torn for some word we could not find.

CHAPTER TEN

We are sitting at a table and we are writing this upon paper made thousands of years ago. The light is dim, and we cannot see the Golden One, only one lock of gold on the pillow of an ancient bed. This is our home.

We came upon it today, at sunrise. For many days we have been crossing a chain of mountains. The forest rose among cliffs, and whenever we walked out upon a barren stretch of rock we saw great peaks before us in the west, and to the north of us, and to the south, as far as our eyes could see. The peaks were red and brown, with the green streaks of forests as veins upon them, with blue mists as veils over their heads. We had never heard of these mountains, nor seen them marked on any map. The Uncharted Forest has protected them from the Cities and from the men of the Cities.

We climbed paths where the wild goat dared not follow. Stones rolled from under our feet, and we heard them striking the rocks below, farther and farther down, and the mountains rang with each stroke, and long after the strokes had died. But we went on, for we knew that no men would ever follow our track nor reach us here.

Then today, at sunrise, we saw a white flame among the trees, high on a sheer peak before us. We thought that it was a fire and we stopped. But the flame was unmoving, yet blinding as liquid metal. So we climbed toward it through the rocks. And there, before us, on a broad summit, with the mountains rising behind it, stood a house such as we had never seen, and the white fire came from the sun on the glass of its windows.

The house had two stories and a strange roof flat as a floor. There was more window than wall upon its walls, and the windows went on straight around corners, though how this house kept standing we could not guess. The walls were hard and smooth, of that stone unlike stone which we had seen in our tunnel.

We both knew it without words: this house was left from the Unmentionable Times. The trees had protected it from time and weather, and from men who have less pity than time and weather. We turned to the Golden One and we asked:

“Are you afraid?”

But they shook their head. So we walked to the door, and we threw it open, and we stepped together into the house of the Unmentionable Times.

We shall need the days and the years ahead, to look, to learn and to understand the things of this house. Today, we could only look and try to believe the sight of our eyes. We pulled the heavy curtains from

the windows and we saw that the rooms were small, and we thought that not more than twelve men could have lived here. We thought it strange that man had been permitted to build a house for only twelve.

Never had we seen rooms so full of light. The sunrays danced upon colors, colors, and more colors than we thought possible, we who had seen no houses save the white ones, the brown ones and the grey. There were great pieces of glass on the walls, but it was not glass, for when we looked upon it we saw our own bodies and all the things behind us, as on the face of a lake. There were strange things which we had never seen and the use of which we do not know. And there were globes of glass everywhere, in each room, the globes with the metal cobwebs inside, such as we had seen in our tunnel.

We found the sleeping hall and we stood in awe upon its threshold. For it was a small room and there were only two beds in it. We found no other beds in the house, and then we knew that only two had lived here, and this passes understanding. What kind of world did they have, the men of the Unmentionable Times?

We found garments, and the Golden One gasped at the sight of them. For they were not white tunics, nor white togas; they were of all colors, no two of them alike. Some crumbled to dust as we touched them, but others were of heavier cloth, and they felt soft and new in our fingers.

We found a room with walls made of shelves, which held rows of manuscripts, from the floor to the ceiling. Never had we seen such a number of them, nor of such strange shape. They were not soft and rolled, they had hard shells of cloth and leather; and the letters on their pages were small and so even that we wondered at the men who had such handwriting. We glanced through the pages, and we saw that they were written in our language, but we found many words which we could not understand. Tomorrow, we shall begin to read these scripts.

When we had seen all the rooms of the house, we looked at the Golden One and we both knew the thought in our minds.

“We shall never leave this house,” we said, “nor let it be taken from us. This is our home and the end of our journey. This is your house, Golden One, and ours, and it belongs to no other men whatever as far as the earth may stretch. We shall not share it with others, as we share not our joy with them, nor our love, nor our hunger. So be it to the end of our days.”

“Your will be done,” they said.

Then we went out to gather wood for the great hearth of our home. We brought water from the stream which runs among the trees under our windows. We killed a mountain goat, and we brought its flesh to be cooked in a strange copper pot we found in a place of

wonders, which must have been the cooking room of the house.

We did this work alone, for no words of ours could take the Golden One away from the big glass which is not glass. They stood before it and they looked and looked upon their own body.

When the sun sank beyond the mountains, the Golden One fell asleep on the floor, amidst jewels, and bottles of crystal, and flowers of silk. We lifted the Golden One in our arms and we carried them to a bed, their head falling softly upon our shoulder. Then we lit a candle, and we brought paper from the room of the manuscripts, and we sat by the window, for we knew that we could not sleep tonight.

And now we look upon the earth and sky. This spread of naked rock and peaks and moonlight is like a world ready to be born, a world that waits. It seems to us it asks a sign from us, a spark, a first commandment. We cannot know what word we are to give, nor what great deed this earth expects to witness. We know it waits. It seems to say it has great gifts to lay before us. We are to speak. We are to give its goal, its highest meaning to all this glowing space of rock and sky.

We look ahead, we beg our heart for guidance in answering this call no voice has spoken, yet we have heard. We look upon our hands. We see the dust of centuries, the dust which hid great secrets and perhaps great evils. And yet it stirs no fear within our heart, but only silent reverence and pity.

May knowledge come to us! What is this secret our heart has understood and yet will not reveal to us, although it seems to beat as if it were endeavoring to tell it?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I am. I think. I will.

My hands… My spirit… My sky… My forest… This earth of mine….

What must I say besides? These are the words. This is the answer.

I stand here on the summit of the mountain. I lift my head and I spread my arms. This, my body and spirit, this is the end of the quest. I wished to know the meaning of things. I am the meaning. I wished to find a warrant for being. I need no warrant for being, and no word of sanction upon my being. I am the warrant and the sanction.

It is my eyes which see, and the sight of my eyes grants beauty to the earth. It is my ears which hear, and the hearing of my ears gives its song to the world. It is my mind which thinks, and the judgment of my mind is the only searchlight that can find the truth. It is my will which chooses, and the choice of my will is the only edict I must respect.

Many words have been granted me, and some are wise, and some are false, but only three are holy: “I will it!”

Whatever road I take, the guiding star is within me; the guiding star and the loadstone which point the way. They point in but one direction. They point to me.

I know not if this earth on which I stand is the core of the universe or if it is but a speck of dust lost in eternity. I know not and I care not. For I know what happiness is possible to me on earth. And my happiness needs no higher aim to vindicate it. My happiness is not the means to any end. It is the end. It is its own goal. It is its own purpose.

Neither am I the means to any end others may wish to accomplish. I am not a tool for their use. I am not a servant of their needs. I am not a bandage for their wounds. I am not a sacrifice on their altars.

I am a man. This miracle of me is mine to own and keep, and mine to guard, and mine to use, and mine to kneel before!

I do not surrender my treasures, nor do I share them. The fortune of my spirit is not to be blown into coins of brass and flung to the winds as alms for the poor of the spirit. I guard my treasures: my thought, my will, my freedom. And the greatest of these is freedom.

I owe nothing to my brothers, nor do I gather debts from them. I ask none to live for me, nor do I live for any others. I covet no man’s soul, nor is my soul theirs to covet.

I am neither foe nor friend to my brothers, but such as each of them shall deserve of me. And to earn my love, my brothers must do

more than to have been born. I do not grant my love without reason, nor to any chance passer-by who may wish to claim it. I honor men with my love. But honor is a thing to be earned.

I shall choose friends among men, but neither slaves nor masters. And I shall choose only such as please me, and them I shall love and respect, but neither command nor obey. And we shall join our hands when we wish, or walk alone when we so desire. For in the temple of his spirit, each man is alone. Let each man keep his temple untouched and undefiled. Then let him join hands with others if he wishes, but only beyond his holy threshold.

For the word "We" must never be spoken, save by one's choice and as a second thought. This word must never be placed first within man's soul, else it becomes a monster, the root of all the evils on earth, the root of man's torture by men, and an unspeakable lie.

The word "We" is as lime poured over men, which sets and hardens to stone, and crushes all beneath it, and that which is white and that which is black are lost equally in the grey of it. It is the word by which the depraved steal the virtue of the good, by which the weak steal the might of the strong, by which the fools steal the wisdom of the sages.

What is my joy if all hands, even the unclean, can reach into it? What is my wisdom, if even the fools can dictate to me? What is my freedom, if all creatures, even the botched and impotent, are my masters? What is my life, if I am but to bow, to agree, and to obey?

But I am done with this creed of corruption.

I am done with the monster of "We," the word of serfdom, of plunder, of misery, falsehood and shame.

And now I see the face of god, and I raise this god over the earth, this god whom men have sought since men came into being, this god who will grant them joy and peace and pride.

This god, this one word:

"I."

CHAPTER TWELVE

It was when I read the first of the books I found in my house that I saw the word "I." And when I understood this word, the book fell from my hands, and I wept, I who had never known tears. I wept in deliverance and in pity for all mankind.

I understood the blessed thing which I had called my curse. I understood why the best in me had been my sins and my transgressions; and why I had never felt guilt in my sins. I understood that centuries of chains and lashes will not kill the spirit of man nor the sense of truth within him.

I read many books for many days. Then I called the Golden One, and I told her what I had read and what I had learned. She looked at me and the first words she spoke were:

"I love you."

Then I said:

"My dearest one, it is not proper for men to be without names. There was a time when each man had a name of his own to distinguish him from all other men. So let us choose our names. I have read of a man who lived many thousands of years ago, and of all the names in these books, his is the one I wish to bear. He took the light of the gods and brought it to men, and he taught men to be gods. And he suffered for his deed as all bearers of light must suffer. His name was Prometheus."

"It shall be your name," said the Golden One.

"And I have read of a goddess," I said, "who was the mother of the earth and of all the gods. Her name was Gaea. Let this be your name, my Golden One, for you are to be the mother of a new kind of gods."

"It shall be my name," said the Golden One.

Now I look ahead. My future is clear before me. The Saint of the pyre had seen the future when he chose me as his heir, as the heir of all the saints and all the martyrs who came before him and who died for the same cause, for the same word, no matter what name they gave to their cause and their truth.

I shall live here, in my own house. I shall take my food from the earth by the toil of my own hands. I shall learn many secrets from my books. Through the years ahead, I shall rebuild the achievements of the past, and open the way to carry them further, the achievements which are open to me, but closed forever to my brothers, for their minds are shackled to the weakest and dullest among them.

I have learned that the power of the sky was known to men long ago; they called it Electricity. It was the power that moved their

greatest inventions. It lit this house with light that came from those globes of glass on the walls. I have found the engine which produced this light. I shall learn how to repair it and how to make it work again. I shall learn how to use the wires which carry this power. Then I shall build a barrier of wires around my home, and across the paths which lead to my home; a barrier light as a cobweb, more impassable than a wall of granite; a barrier my brothers will never be able to cross. For they have nothing to fight me with, save the brute force of their numbers. I have my mind.

Then here, on this mountaintop, with the world below me and nothing above me but the sun, I shall live my own truth. Gaea is pregnant with my child. He will be taught to say "I" and to bear the pride of it. He will be taught to walk straight on his own feet. He will be taught reverence for his own spirit.

When I shall have read all the books and learned my new way, when my home will be ready and my earth tilled, I shall steal one day, for the last time, into the cursed City of my birth. I shall call to me my friend who has no name save International 4-8818, and all those like him, Fraternity 2-5503, who cries without reason, and Solidarity 9-6347 who calls for help in the night, and a few others. I shall call to me all the men and the women whose spirit has not been killed within them and who suffer under the yoke of their brothers. They will follow me and I shall lead them to my fortress. And here, in this uncharted wilderness, I and they, my chosen friends, my fellow-builders, shall write the first chapter in the new history of man.

These are the last things before me. And as I stand here at the door of glory, I look behind me for the last time. I look upon the history of men, which I have learned from the books, and I wonder. It was a long story, and the spirit which moved it was the spirit of man's freedom. But what is freedom? Freedom from what? There is nothing to take a man's freedom away from him, save other men. To be free, a man must be free of his brothers. That is freedom. That and nothing else.

At first, man was enslaved by the gods. But he broke their chains. Then he was enslaved by the kings. But he broke their chains. He was enslaved by his birth, by his kin, by his race. But he broke their chains. He declared to all his brothers that a man has rights which neither god nor king nor other men can take away from him, no matter what their number, for his is the right of man, and there is no right on earth above this right. And he stood on the threshold of freedom for which the blood of the centuries behind him had been spilled.

But then he gave up all he had won, and fell lower than his savage beginning.

What brought it to pass? What disaster took their reason away from men? What whip lashed them to their knees in shame and submission? The worship of the word "We."

When men accepted that worship, the structure of centuries collapsed about them, the structure whose every beam had come from the thought of some one man, each in his day down the ages, from the depth of some one spirit, such as spirit existed but for its own sake. Those men who survived—those eager to obey, eager to live for one another, since they had nothing else to vindicate them—those men could neither carry on, nor preserve what they had received. Thus did all thought, all science, all wisdom perish on earth. Thus did men—men with nothing to offer save their great numbers—lose the steel towers, the flying ships, the power wires, all the things they had not created and could never keep. Perhaps, later, some men had been born with the mind and the courage to recover these things which were lost; perhaps these men came before the Councils of Scholars. They answered as I have been answered—and for the same reasons.

But I still wonder how it was possible, in those graceless years of transition, long ago, that men did not see whither they were going, and went on, in blindness and cowardice, to their fate. I wonder, for it is hard for me to conceive how men who knew the word "I," could give it up and not know what they had lost. But such has been the story, for I have lived in the City of the damned, and I know what horror men permitted to be brought upon them.

Perhaps, in those days, there were a few among men, a few of clear sight and clean soul, who refused to surrender that word. What agony must have been theirs before that which they saw coming and could not stop! Perhaps they cried out in protest and in warning. But men paid no heed to their warning. And they, those few, fought a hopeless battle, and they perished with their banners smeared by their own blood. And they chose to perish, for they knew. To them, I send my salute across the centuries, and my pity.

Theirs is the banner in my hand. And I wish I had the power to tell them that the despair of their hearts was not to be final, and their night was not without hope. For the battle they lost can never be lost. For that which they died to save can never perish. Through all the darkness, through all the shame of which men are capable, the spirit of man will remain alive on this earth. It may sleep, but it will awaken. It may wear chains, but it will break through. And man will go on. Man, not men.

Here, on this mountain, I and my sons and my chosen friends shall build our new land and our fort. And it will become as the heart of the earth, lost and hidden at first, but beating, beating louder each day. And word of it will reach every corner of the earth. And the roads

of the world will become as veins which will carry the best of the world's blood to my threshold. And all my brothers, and the Councils of my brothers, will hear of it, but they will be impotent against me. And the day will come when I shall break the chains of the earth, and raze the cities of the enslaved, and my home will become the capital of a world where each man will be free to exist for his own sake.

For the coming of that day I shall fight, I and my sons and my chosen friends. For the freedom of Man. For his rights. For his life. For his honor.

And here, over the portals of my fort, I shall cut in the stone the word which is to be my beacon and my banner. The word which will not die, should we all perish in battle. The word which can never die on this earth, for it is the heart of it and the meaning and the glory.

The sacred word:

EGO

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

JASON ANDREW

Jason Andrew lives in Seattle, Washington with his wife Lisa. He is an associate member of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America and member of the International Association of Media Tie-In Writers. By day, he works as a mild-mannered technical writer. By night, he writes stories of the fantastic and occasionally fights crime. As a child, Jason spent his Saturdays watching the Creature Feature classics and furiously scribbling down stories; his first short story, written at age six, titled 'The Wolfman Eats Perry Mason' was rejected and caused his Grandmother to watch him very closely for a few years. You can read more about him at www.jasonbandrew.com.

ISAAC ASIMOV

Isaac Asimov (1920–1992) was a Russian American author and professor of biochemistry at Boston University, best known for his works of science fiction and for his popular science books. Asimov was one of the most prolific writers of all time, having written or edited more than 500 books and an estimated 90,000 letters and postcards.

JOHN GREGORY BETANCOURT

John Gregory Betancourt is a writer of science fiction, fantasy and mysteries. He is the author of four *Star Trek* novels and the new *Chronicles of Amber* prequel series (to Roger Zelazy's "Amber" books), as well as a dozen original novels, including *The Blind Archer*, *Johnny Zed*, *Rememory*, and *Master of Dragons*. He has published more than 100 short stories. His essays, articles, and reviews have appeared in such diverse publications as *Writer's Digest*, *The Washington Post*, and *Amazing Stories*.

RAY CLULEY

Ray Cluley is the co-editor of the anthology *Darker Minds* (with Gary McMahon). His short fiction has appeared in such diverse markets as *Interzone*, *Black Static*, *Black Gate*, *Not One Of Us*, and *Best*

Horror of the Year.

PHILIP K. DICK

Philip K. Dick (1928–1982) was an American novelist, short story writer and essayist whose published work is almost entirely in the science fiction genre. Dick explored sociological, political and metaphysical themes in novels dominated by monopolistic corporations, authoritarian governments and altered states. In his later works Dick's thematic focus strongly reflected his personal interest in metaphysics and theology. He often drew upon his own life experiences in addressing the nature of drug abuse, paranoia and schizophrenia, and transcendental experiences in novels such as *A Scanner Darkly* and *VALIS*.

JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

John Russell Fearn (1908–1960) was a British author and one of the first British writers to appear in American pulp science fiction magazines. Fearn was a prolific writer who wrote Westerns and crime fiction as well as science fiction. His writing appeared under numerous pseudonyms. He wrote series like Adam Quirke, Clayton Drew, Golden Amazon, and Herbert. At times these drew on the pulp traditions of Edgar Rice Burroughs.

DAVID GRINNELL

"David Grinnell" is a pseudonym used by Donald A. Wollheim. See his entry for more info!

HARRY HARRISON

Harry Harrison is an American science fiction author best known for his character the Stainless Steel Rat and the novel *Make Room! Make Room!* (1966), the basis for the film *Soylent Green* (1973). Before becoming an editor, Harrison started in the science fiction field as an illustrator, notably with EC Comics' two science fiction comic books, *Weird Fantasy* and *Weird Science*. He has used house names such as Wade Kaempfert and Philip St. John to edit magazines, and has published other fictions under the names Felix Boyd, Leslie Charteris,

and Hank Dempsey. Harrison is now much better known for his writing, particularly his humorous and satirical science fiction, such as the Stainless Steel Rat series and the novel *Bill the Galactic Hero* (which satirises Robert A. Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*).

Harry's contribution to *The Fourth Science Fiction Megapack* is the alternate, 1961 magazine version of his novel, *Planet of the Damned*.

LARRY HODGES

Larry Hodges is an active member of SFWA with numerous short story sales. He was the 2010 Garden State Horror Writers Short Story Competition Grand Prize Winner. He's a graduate of the Odyssey Writing Workshop and a full-time writer with four books and over 1300 published articles. Visit him at www.larryhodges.org.

HENRY KUTTNER

Henry Kuttner (1915–1958) was an American author of science fiction, fantasy and horror. Kuttner was known for his literary prose and worked in close collaboration with his wife, C. L. Moore. They met through their association with the "Lovecraft Circle", a group of writers and fans who corresponded with H. P. Lovecraft.

MURRAY LEINSTER

Murray Leinster (1896–1975) was the nom de plume of William Fitzgerald Jenkins, an award-winning American writer of science fiction and alternate history. He wrote and published over 1,500 short stories and articles, 14 movie scripts, and hundreds of radio scripts and television plays. Wildside Press has many of his works in print.

MILTON LESSER

Stephen Marlowe (born Milton Lesser, 1928–2008) was an American author of science fiction, mystery novels, and fictional autobiographies of Christopher Columbus, Spanish author Miguel de Cervantes, and Edgar Allan Poe. He is best known for his detective character Chester Drum, whom he created in the 1955 novel *The Second Longest Night*.

MARISSA LINGEN

Marissa writes: “Like many people who write fiction for a living, I’m a good deal more comfortable making things up about other people who don’t exist than I am figuring out what to say about myself. I’ve sold enough short stories at this point that I have a standard one-sentence biography: ‘Marissa Lingen is a freelance writer who lives in Minnesota with two large men and one small dog.’ This is true but not perhaps optimally illuminating!”

KATHERINE MACLEAN

Katherine Anne MacLean (born January 22, 1925) is an American science fiction author best known for her short fiction of the 1950s which examined the impact of technological advances on individuals and society.

JAMES K. MORAN

James K. Moran writes: “My horror story, “Glimpses through the trees,” which appeared in *Curtain Call: The Rolling Darkness Revue 2010*, was included by editor Ellen Datlow in her ‘Honourable Mentions’ list for *Best Horror of the Year 3*. My fiction has also appeared in the *Algonquin Roundtable Review* and the *Peter F. Yacht Club*, while my poetry has appeared in various Canadian literary magazines.

EDGAR PANGBORN

Edgar Pangborn (1909–1976) was an American mystery, historical, and science fiction author. For the first 20 years of Edgar’s writing career, which started when he was 21, Edgar wrote what he referred to as “literary hackwork” for the pulp magazines. His serious work began in 1951, with the publication of his first science fiction story, “Angel’s Egg”, in Galaxy Science Fiction. By 1954 Edgar was well-known and his second science fiction novel, *A Mirror for Observers* won the International Fantasy Award.

CARMELO RAFALÁ

Carmelo Rafalá's stories have appeared in Jupiter, Estronomicon, Neon Literary Journal, and the anthologies The West Pier Gazette and Other Stories (Three Legged Fox Books) and Rocket Science (Mutation Press). Carmelo is Senior Editor for Immersion Press and lives on the south coast of England with his wife and daughter.

AYN RAND

Ayn Rand (1905–1982) was a Russian-American novelist, philosopher, playwright, and screenwriter. She is known for her two best-selling novels The Fountainhead and Atlas Shrugged and for developing a philosophical system she called Objectivism.

GEORGE H. SCITHERS

George H. Scithers won the Hugo Award 4 times—twice for editing *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* and twice for editing *Amra*, a sword & sorcery fan magazine. He went on to edit *Amazing Stories* and *Weird Tales* (with Darrell Schweitzer and John Gregory Betancourt).

JAMES C. STEWART

James C. Stewart appeared in the debut issue of Paradox: The Magazine of Historical & Speculative Fiction. He's currently seeking a publisher for two novels, and is at home working on his third. He lives in North Bay, Ontario, Canada.

THEODORE STURGEON

Theodore Sturgeon (born Edward Hamilton Waldo; 1918–1985) was an American science fiction and horror author. His most famous novel is *More Than Human* (1953).

E. C. TUBB

Edwin Charles Tubb (1919–2010) was a British writer of science fiction, fantasy and western novels. The author of over 140 novels and 230 short stories and novellas, Tubb is best known for *The Dumarest Saga* (US collective title: *Dumarest of Terra*) an epic science-fiction

saga set in the far future. Michael Moorcock wrote “His reputation for fast-moving and colourful SF writing is unmatched by anyone in Britain.”

MARY A. TURZILLO

Mary A. Turzillo is an American science fiction writer noted primarily for short stories. She won the Nebula Award for Best Novelette in 2000 for her story “Mars is No Place for Children,” (published originally in *Science Fiction Age*), and her story “Pride,” (published originally in *Fast Forward 1*), was a Nebula award finalist for best short story of 2007. Her first novel, *An Old Fashioned Martian Girl* was serialized in *Analog* magazine in 2004.

She was formerly a professor of English at Kent State University, where she wrote articles and several books of science fiction criticism under the name Mary T. Brizzi, including *Reader’s Guide to Anne McCaffrey* and *Reader’s Guide to Philip Jose Farmer*. She attended the Clarion Workshop in 1985, and she founded the Cajun Sushi Hamsters writing workshop in Cleveland, OH.

KURT VONNEGUT, JR.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. (1922–2007) was a 20th century American writer. His works such as *Cat’s Cradle* (1963), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) and *Breakfast of Champions* (1973) blend satire, gallows humor and science fiction. As a citizen he was a lifelong supporter of the American Civil Liberties Union and a critical liberal intellectual. He was known for his humanist beliefs and was honorary president of the American Humanist Association.

CYNTHIA WARD

Cynthia Ward was born in Oklahoma and lived in Maine, Spain, Germany, the San Francisco Bay Area, Seattle, and Tucson before moving to the Los Angeles area. A 1992 graduate of the Clarion West Writers Workshop, she has sold stories to *Asimov’s Science Fiction*, and numerous other anthologies and magazines. Cynthia’s reviews appear regularly on Amazon.com and SciFiWire.com and irregularly in other websites and publications. She is working on her first novel, a futuristic mystery tentatively titled *Stone Rain*.

DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

Donald Allen Wollheim (1914–1990) was an American science fiction editor, publisher (of DAW Books), writer, and fan. As an author, he published under his own name as well as under pseudonyms, including David Grinnell. A founding member of the Futurians, he was a leading influence on science fiction development and fandom in the 20th century United States.

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"Tiny and the Monster," by Theodore Sturgeon, originally appeared in *Astounding Science Fiction*, May 1947.

"Beyond Lies the Wub," by Philip K. Dick, originally appeared in *Planet Stories,* July 1952.

"Pictures Don't Lie," by Katherine MacLean, originally appeared in *Galaxy Science Fiction*, August, 1951.

"The Big Trip Up Yonder," by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., originally appeared in Galaxy Science Fiction, January 1954.

"Storm Warning," by Donald A. Wollheim, originally appeared in *Future Fantasy and Science Fiction*, October 1942.

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"Top Secret," by David Grinnell (pseudonym of Donald A. Wollheim) originally appeared in *Sir!*, April 1948.

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"Sense of Obligation," by Harry Harrison, originally appeared in *Analog* in 1961. It was later published in revised book form as *Planet of the Damned.*

"Angel's Egg," by Edgar Pangborn, originally appeared in *Galaxy*, June 1951.

"Youth," by Isaac Asimov, originally appeared in *Space Science Fiction,* May 1952.

notes

Notes

1

Dr. Bannerman's dog, mentioned often earlier in the journal. A nine-year-old English setter. According to an entry of May 15, 1951, she was then beginning to go blind. —BLAINE.

2

At this point Dr. Bannerman's handwriting alters curiously. From here on he used a soft pencil instead of a pen, and the script shows signs of haste. In spite of this, however, it is actually much clearer, steadier, and easier to read than the earlier entries in his normal hand. —BLAINE.

3

In spite of superficial changes in the handwriting, this signature has been certified genuine by an expert graphologist. —BLAINE.

4

Dr. Bannerman's mother died in 1918 of influenza. His brother (three years older, not younger) died of pneumonia, 1906. —BLAINE.

5

LIBRARIAN'S NOTE: But it seems he never did. No new edition of *Introductory Biology* was ever brought out, and the textbook has been out of print since 1952.